

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 December 2014

Latin America

Honduran public workers continue protests against mass firings

Members of several public service employees' unions marched through the main streets of the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa December 6. The marchers protested the suspensions and firings over the last four months of masses of workers at the state-run Hondutel (telecommunications), ENEE (electricity) and Sanaa (aqueducts and sewerage) enterprises.

The day before, about 50 employees protested in front of Hondutel against the "temporary" suspension of 728 workers. Management attributes the layoffs to a financial crisis at the firm; the protesters denounced the "juicy raises" that executives have given themselves.

Firings and suspensions have swept through Honduran state-run agencies. ENEE authorities have announced the suspension of 2,000 workers, while Hondutel has sacked more than 700 and Sanaa announced last week that it is letting go of about 400 in the near future.

On December 5, the National Institute of Teachers Pensions (Inprema) announced the firing of at least 120 employees for having taken part in a previous protest, which the institute's director called "illegal." The Inprema employees had joined a protest in solidarity with engineering department colleagues who had objected to changes in the agency's housing construction and financing procedures.

Honduran bus drivers strike over gang extortion and violence

At least 100 buses in San Pedro Sula, the second largest city in Honduras, were grounded on December 2 due to the killings of a driver and a dispatcher the day before. The drivers demanded support from owners and security from the government, demands that they have made for years with few or no results.

The striking drivers said that recently gang members threatened to kill them if they did not pay 50,000 lempiras (US\$2,365). They also pointed out that the owners of the buses were not paying extortion demands of criminal gangs.

Gangs in poor and working-class neighborhoods routinely extort money from drivers and riders, backing up their threats with violence, often fatal. As the economic crisis has deepened in Central America, so have these crimes, not only in Honduras, but in Guatemala, El Salvador and other Latin American countries as well.

Short strike by Panamanian bus drivers over conditions, suspensions

Drivers for the Panamanian transportation operator Mi Bus stopped work at midnight, December 3, over the suspensions of some 90 drivers on several Panama City routes. Mi Bus spokespeople claimed that the drivers were let go due to tardiness and other infractions, but the drivers' union, Movimiento 13/14, accused the company of retaliating against the drivers for their participation in a previous strike on October 13 and 14.

Following that walkout, Mi Bus and the union, with the mediation of the Labor Ministry (Mitradel), signed an agreement in which Mi Bus agreed not to take any action against the striking workers. Accusing Mi Bus of breach of contract, Movimiento 13/14 director Antenor Guadamuz told *La Estrella*, "If the state doesn't face up to the truth or ensure that labor laws are complied with, there will be a strike."

Later in the morning of December 4, however, a four-point accord was signed between the union and Mi Bus, and the drivers were called back on the job. One of the points deals with reintegrating the fired workers. "The operators of metrobuses plan to submit a list of demands and sit down to negotiate anew, probably on December 9," noted the daily.

Dominican Republic: Teachers protest for Christmas bonus, just salary

Teachers in Santo Domingo held a protest outside the headquarters of the Dominican Republic's Education Ministry on December 4. Holding picket signs and singing parodies of holiday songs, the teachers aired their demands for improvements in salaries and conditions and for a holiday bonus.

The teachers repeated their rejection of the government's 12 percent raise offer and demanded 25 percent. They also denounced increased contributions that they will be required to pay for medical insurance.

Technical education workers were also at the protest. One technician told reporters, "They've tried to con us with an unconstitutional agreement; we are demanding in the courts what is the application of what the law establishes, 32 percent as a base salary and 35 retroactive that they still owe us."

The action was held under the vigilance of antiriot police, as protesters voiced the possibility of a general strike.

St. Lucian insurance workers stage sick-out, sit-in

On December 4, employees at St. Lucia's National Insurance Corporation (NIC) staged an island-wide sit-in. The action, which followed a December 1 sick-out, was called by the National Workers Union (NWU) over complaints of employee victimization and the slow pace of negotiations.

Contract talks between the NIC and the NWU have been stalled over issues such as salaries, job reclassifications and labor conditions, including mistreatment and intimidation of employees. One demand of the workers is the removal of NIC negotiating team leader Victor Poyotte, whom the union blames for delaying tactics. The NWU accuses Poyotte of walking out of talks November 20.

The United States

University of Oregon graduate students strike

Graduate students at the University of Oregon continued their strike

over the weekend after state-mediated talks failed to bridge differences over wages and paid leave demands by the 1,500-member Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation. Graduate students launched their strike on December 2 as the union clung to its demand for a 5.5 percent wage increase against the administration's offers of 4 and 5 percent.

But the main issue that has polarized graduate students and the administration is the union's demand for a yearly two-week paid medical or maternity leave. The university responded with a \$150,000 hardship fund but refused to include contract language providing clear access to the fund. Instead, the administration is insisting it will control whether grad students can access the fund.

The graduate student union has been in existence for 38 years, and this is the first time the administration has brought in an outside law firm to aid management in combating the union. They were rebuffed, though, by teachers at a nearby community college when they sought to enlist them as strikebreakers.

The university's faculty union has charged the administration with having "compromised the core academic integrity of the grading process." The university is planning to base final grades for this semester on work completed up through the beginning of the strike. Sociology professor Michael Dreiling accused the administration of "using it...as a power play or a point of leverage—to say you can't win this strike. We've got grades covered." Grad students provide about one third of instruction for the university's undergraduate students.

The strike has won support from student organizations, faculty, alumni and campus workers including Teamster garbage collectors who have refused to cross picket lines.

Delta Airlines fires Minnesota worker for advocating higher minimum wage

Some 100 demonstrators rallied at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International airport December 5 demanding Delta Airlines rescind its firing of an employee. Kip Hedges, a 26-year baggage handler, was fired earlier last week for criticizing the low wages of airport workers.

In a video posted on the web site of Workday Minnesota, Hedges said, "A lot of the Delta workers make under \$15 an hour. As a matter of fact, I would say probably close to half make under \$15 an hour." The comments were made in support of the 15 Now campaign which is advocating a new minimum wage of \$15 an hour.

Delta management informed Hedges that his comments violated the Advocacy Policy, which prohibits "untrue or disparaging" public remarks. A statement by the company said it "requires all employees to meet company performance and conduct standards. This includes upholding our core values of respect and honesty in any communications regarding Delta."

Hedges told Workday Minnesota he was merely stating facts. "On the ramp, there are close to a majority of workers who make less than \$15 an hour," and that workers employed by subcontractors make even less.

One of Hedges's co-workers said of the firing, "People feel like the company is ruling very heavy-handed." Another said it was an "intimidation move" by Delta. Thousands of workers, including those at Delta hubs across the country, have signed an online petition in support of Hedges.

In 2005, Northwest Airlines, which was based in Minneapolis-St. Paul, broke a strike by machinists. In 2009, the baggage handlers' union was broken when Northwest was absorbed by Delta. Since then, airline wages have plummeted and the company has subcontracted work to low-wage outside vendors.

Canada

Saskatchewan tech service workers set to strike

More than 300 employees of Information Systems Management Canada (ISM) in Regina and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, could be on strike this week after working without a contract for over a year.

ISM is a subsidiary of IBM that provides information technology service to private and government clients. Negotiators for Unifor, the union representing workers, says that ISM is demanding sweeping concessions in a new contract, including limits on union representation, while offering a \$2,000 signing bonus as a sop to workers.

A two-week cooling-off period, mandated from mediation last month, expired on Monday, leaving the door open for a strike with 48 hours' notice at any time.

Manitoba liquor workers vote to strike

A total of 868 workers employed by the recently merged Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries (MLL), a government agency, voted nearly unanimously for strike action last week with a historically high turnout.

The workers are represented by the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU). The employer has proposed a modest wage increase, thought to be around 2 percent, in exchange for union gains that have been in place for more than 50 years. Proposed concession demands include givebacks on a range of benefits as well as sick-time provisions.

The timing of the strike vote, just before the holiday season, is clearly intended to give the union a bargaining advantage, and restaurants and outlets are reported to be stocking up in case of a strike that would cut off supply.



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