

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 December 2014

Latin America

National strike by Chilean Wal-Mart workers over wages, benefits

On December 11, some 12,000 workers for Wal-Mart Chile and its affiliates struck nationwide. The National Federation of Wal-Mart Workers, which embraces 70 unions, called the action to demand “an increase in remuneration depending on seniority, as well as raises in bonuses in general, determined monthly as well as by specialty, and better aguinaldos [end-of-year bonuses].”

A statement on the federation’s web site denounced Wal-Mart’s practice of *multirrut*—the restructuring of businesses into multiple corporate entities to avoid labor and other costs—which has resulted in a number of entities, like *Híper*, *Express*, *Acuenta* and *Grupo Restaurantes*, under Wal-Mart’s control. Wal-Mart promotes separate negotiations by each firm with its workers instead of industrywide.

The statement slammed the Inter-enterprise Wal-Mart Workers Union (SIL), which “carries out pseudo-negotiations in which benefits are equalized only for the workers with the most seniority. Also in the SIL they negotiate union guidelines with neither any consultation nor participation of the workers. And as payment for their services, that union gets a share from those persons through benefit extension pacts.”

Following the statement was an open letter to Labor Minister Javiera Blanco, asking her to intervene in the dispute.

Protesters marched through downtown Santiago, chanting and carrying signs, one of which declared, “The American Anti-Christ has arrived. Its name is Wal-Mart.”

Argentine bus drivers’ strike, march to protest suspensions, wages, conditions

Drivers on Buenos Aires’ Line 60 bus route began a strike December 11 to protest the suspensions of some of their colleagues and to demand improvements in working conditions and wages. The workers marched through downtown to the Labor Ministry, where union officials held a press conference denouncing layoffs of workers who had been involved in previous protests.

The workers also called for wage increases, an end to persecution of union members, and expansion of services in line with the government subsidies that the bus company has received.

The drivers’ union has held meetings recently with management, but according to one delegate, it “showed no will for dialogue” and “violated the obligatory conciliation” (binding arbitration), while the Labor Ministry “does not want to take a position” on the dispute.

The union said that the measures would continue if the company and the ministry do not address the issues.

Mexican university workers strike over wage, benefit demands

The union representing workers at the Autonomous Meritorious University of Puebla (BUAP), Mexico notified the local arbitration board December 10 of plans to strike to demand a 20 percent “global” increase in wages and benefits. The workers’ union, the BUAP Workers Independent Syndicate (SITBUAP), is calling for a 10 percent raise each in direct salaries and benefits.

BUAP has rejected the demand; the rector, Alfonso Esparza Ortiz, claims that the Secretariat of Education has established a cap, making the 20 percent figure “impossible.” He pointed to the recent 3.7 percent raise granted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico as an example.

In accordance with Mexican labor law, SITBUAP presented its strike notification to the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board. As reported in *El Financiero*, “Once the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board notifies the

university of the strike summons, contractual and salary negotiations will commence, so it is estimated that it will be in the first weeks of January 2015 when the works of the institutional board begin.”

24-hour strike by Mexican hospital workers

Over 740 workers at the High Specialty Regional Hospital of Oaxaca (HRAEO), Mexico struck for one day December 12. Administrative, consultative, laboratory and outpatient services were all suspended, while emergency, hospitalization and urgent surgery services continued.

Meanwhile, the workers’ union and the hospital have agreed to hold negotiations. The demands that the union will bring include the firing of the director, amplification of infrastructure and the hiring of more personnel.

Guadalupe Hernandez, secretary of local 96 of the union, SNTSA, told reporters, “There’s the promise to increase the number of employees by 20 percent, since the current number is insufficient for giving the quality attention that the patients deserve. At least 150 more workers are required. Presently a staff of only 750 unionized workers is expected to care for three million, 500,000 people.”

Since 2006, according to HRAEO workers, there has been “zero” growth in personnel, while demand keeps growing. The number of doctors, 120, is the same as it was then. “Therefore we are demanding a larger budget and more supplies and that they amplify the infrastructure,” one worker told *noticiasnet.mx*.

The United States

Food workers at San Francisco International airport end two-day strike

Restaurant Workers at San Francisco International Airport ended their two-day strike December 13 seeking job security and protesting management’s contract demand to freeze health care payments. Some 1,000 workers who staff the airport’s 55 various food concessions claim that a new proposal will result in workers paying up to \$4,200 yearly for health care.

Workers currently make an average annual wage of \$24,124 compared to the \$200 million that restaurant owners take in. “They’re making so much money and we’re not making enough,” a worker told CNN.

According to Unite Here Local 2, the SFO Airport Restaurant Employer Council, which negotiates on behalf of restaurant interests, will not contribute any additional money to health care costs. New talks are to have resumed Monday and the union has indicated it may call another strike during the busy holiday season.

Labor board judge rules Wal-Mart guilty of intimidation and illegal discipline at California store

A National Labor Relations Board judge issued a ruling December 9 that Wal-Mart illegally threatened to fire and intimidated six employees at a Richmond, California store. The judge said Wal-Mart had illegally disciplined six employees for taking part in a 2012 strike and banned other workers from speaking to the six.

One manager told workers, “If it were up to me, I’d shoot the union.” Another manager told a worker pulling a heavy load with a rope, “If it was up to me, I would put that rope around your neck.” Workers were also told if they took part in a strike, they would be looking for another job.

The complaint was initiated by Our Wal-Mart, which is backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and has been campaigning for a \$15 minimum wage. Wal-Mart indicated that they would appeal parts of the decision before the NLRB in Washington.

Canada

Vancouver Island newspaper workers on strike

Workers at The *Cowichan News Leader Pictorial*, one of two daily newspapers in the City of Duncan, BC on Vancouver Island, went on strike at the beginning of December for first time in the paper’s history.

The 12 workers gave their union, Unifor, a unanimous strike mandate in the face of company demands for a two-tiered wage structure that would eliminate the top pay level for new hires. Union negotiators say that they have not had a response to a contract proposal that was delivered last week.

The *News Leader Pictorial* is owned by community newspaper publisher *Black Press*, which owns over 150 publications and has a workforce of over 3,500. A spokesman for the company says that the company must keep wages down to keep the company competitive.



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