

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 January 2015

Latin America

Mexican health sector workers strike for overdue benefit payments

Members of Section 35 of the National Syndicate of Health Secretariat Workers (SNTSS) stopped work in hospitals, health centers and Health Secretariat offices in the Mexican state of Oaxaca January 13. Emergency services were not struck.

Close to 12,000 workers took part in the strike, in which they demanded the payment of overdue year-end salary bonuses, third-party insurance and other benefits.

On January 16, the Oaxaca secretary of health, Germán Tenorio, announced that the strike would end on Monday, January 19, as the result of an accord signed by SNTSS following a meeting with the state governor, Gabino Cué, and members of his cabinet.

The government agreed to speed up the insurance payments, which come to 800 million pesos (US\$55 million) and claimed that it had already “liberated” 40 million pesos (US\$2.75 million) for the overdue salaries and year-end payments of about 4,000 full-time workers.

SNTSS Section 35 head Mario Félix, claiming “substantial advances” in the talks, stated that a planned march would go ahead to demand that the government respond to other demands, including payments—which have already been deducted from salaries—to the social security and home loan funds.

Mexican teachers strike over security issues

Classes in six barrios in the city of Acapulco have not resumed this year because teachers there complain of insecurity during December. A number of teachers were victimized by gangs following the payment of their end-of-year bonuses.

One form of extortion is known as *secuestro expreso*, or “express kidnapping,” in which a person is forced to ride in a car to withdraw savings from an ATM. Express kidnappings take place in urban areas in a number of Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Peru and Brazil.

The gangs often lie in wait on the perimeters of the schools. Two years before, teachers requested and obtained military patrols in the areas, but after the situation calmed down somewhat, the gangs returned.

A number of parents joined the teachers, saying that organized gangs demand “protection” money from their children.

Protests against Peruvian youth labor law continue

Friday, January 16, marked the fourth protest march for the repeal of Peru’s Youth Labor Law, also known as the Pulpin Law, which was approved by Congress in December. Thousands of youth as well as members of social organizations and unions were joined by spokespeople from 14 different zones who converged on Lima to join the protest and march to Congress.

Barriers one meter (3 feet) high were set up to block protesters from using walkways, but the marchers continued anyway. In some instances, police used teargas on marchers to disperse them and keep them from reaching the Congress. Some protesters reacted by throwing rocks. About a dozen people, including a journalist, were arrested.

Supporters of the law, including President Ollanta Humala, Congress and government and business officials, claim that it will help ease youth unemployment, protect young workers’ rights and improve Peru’s economy. However, support for the legislation has sunk to 20 percent, according to a recent poll.

In fact, as the WWS reported December 30, the law will “cut labor benefits in order to lower the cost of hiring young workers. Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 will have no access to unemployment compensation, life insurance, family bonuses or the right to vacations.”

In other areas of the country, smaller mobilizations took place.

10-day strike by Brazilian autoworkers over firings ends

The strike begun January 6 by Volkswagen auto factory workers in Brazil’s so-called ABC—the Santo Andre, Sao Bernardo do Campo and Sao Caetano do Sul industrial belt in the Sao Paulo metropolitan area—ended on January 16 with the signing of an agreement between the employers and the workers’ union. The workers, some 13,000 of whom had participated in the strike, voted in assemblies to approve the settlement.

The strike broke out against continuing layoffs in the Brazilian auto sector. In 2014, employers laid off or fired 12,400 as sales declined in the nation, which was once touted as an emerging leader in the auto industry. Since 2013, sales have dropped 40.9 percent.

The catalyst for the strike was the announcement of 800 layoffs at a Volkswagen plant, coupled with the layoffs of more than 200 workers at a Mercedes Benz factory, where a 24-hour strike had already taken place. During the 10 days, workers from other plants in the ABC twice joined the VW and Mercedes workers to march and demonstrate, periodically blocking roads to and from Sao Paulo.

In the agreement, VW promised to rehire the 800 laid-off workers and “includes a work plan extending until 2019 and confirms previously-negotiated wage adjustments for 2016-2019,” according to a report in EFE. A VW Brazil statement said that the deal “includes mechanisms for staff adjustment by means of voluntary retirement with financial incentives and by curtailing temporary hiring of subcontractors to use employees in those positions.”

Bahaman hotel workers vote to strike over cutoff of gratuities

Workers at the Melia Nassau Beach resort voted January 16 in favor of a strike over the hotel's change of policy regarding tips (gratuities). The election was held by the Bahamas Hotel Catering and Allied Workers Union (BHCAW). Of the 226 voting workers (out of a total of 371 eligible to vote), 225 voted in favor.

Hotel management claims that the change is necessary to make the hotel more "inclusive." Previously, the hotel automatically added 15 percent to food and beverage bills of guests. After unilaterally removing the 15 percent, the Melia obtained a court injunction preventing the workers from taking industrial action. However, the injunction expired January 7.

BHCAW and management have held fruitless meetings for months, with management claiming that guests on the all-inclusive plan cannot be charged because they pay a daily rate. The union claims that the 15 percent is part of their already low salaries, so the change amounts to a drop in pay.

Now that it has the vote, the BHCAW has hesitated to call a strike. "As long as we have a legal strike vote in hand then you should anticipate at some point something is going to happen," said union general secretary Darren Woods, adding, "But I can't give away the secrets."

Jamaican highway workers block road to protest pay discrepancies

Workers on Jamaica's Highway 2000, a 230-kilometer (142 miles) multilane toll road from Kingston to Montego Bay, blocked a roundabout in Treadways, stalling traffic on January 12. The workers staged the blockage to protest discrepancies in their wages.

The workers accused their employer, the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), of shorting and delays. A police officer assigned to the area told rjnewsonline.com, "The workers have been protesting nonpayment of salaries and in other instances the reduction of payment since last year. They say they will continue the protest until their issues are addressed."

The highway was reopened when the CHEC agreed to talk with the workers. The protest followed a January 5 along another stretch of Highway 2000, where workers downed their tools in response to changes in the hours and pay.

The United States

Pressure builds to resolve contract standoff at West Coast ports

Some 175 business groups issued a letter January 16 to management and union representatives involved in stalled negotiations at West Coast ports. "Supply chains across all of our industry sectors have already been adversely impacted," the letter said. "The stakes are extremely high and the uncertainty at the West Coast ports is causing great reputational and economic harm to our nation."

According to reports, container terminals are now at 90 percent capacity and the failure to clear the containers that clog terminals will lead to gridlock. This backlog is forcing vessels to remain anchored while they await the opportunity to discharge containers and the average cost per day that a vessel remains anchored is calculated at \$40,000. Meanwhile, some traffic is being rerouted to East Coast ports.

The Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), which represents employers,

has accused the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) of refusing to provide qualified crane operators to clear ports of containers since November. The PMA charges that the ILWU has reduced by 67 percent the number of skilled equipment operators.

The ILWU has countercharged that the PMA began reducing the number of vessel gangs from the high of eight on larger ships to three gangs last July. By New Year's that total dropped to one gang and currently the PMA has ended the use of gangs on night shifts. Behind this strategy was the PMA calculation that the loss of jobs would compel the ILWU to accept greater concessions.

On January 12, dockworkers in Portland, Oregon walked off the job. According to rumors, a section of the 72 members represented by the PMA are pressing for a lockout of the ILWU. Since January, a federal mediator has joined the talks.

Canada

CP rail workers poised for strike

Over 1,600 workers at Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd. across the country who are represented by Unifor have been in a legal strike position since January 15 after voting almost unanimously in favor of strike action.

The workers affected include safety and maintenance staff whose last contract expired at the end of the year. Union negotiators say they are fighting excessive disciplinary measures routinely implemented by the employer as well as significant concession demands in a new contract.

At the same time, union leaders are seeking to win contract provisions to offset recent anti-union laws passed by the federal government that, among other things, facilitate union decertification by a minority vote.

Community care workers push for strike

After working without a contract since March of last year, community care access coordinators across Ontario could go on strike by the end of the month if an agreement is not reached with their employer through mediated talks that are in their final stages.

Care coordinators include nurses and other health workers who provide access to home care and long-term care at Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) in 14 locations throughout Ontario, 10 of which could be affected by a strike. The Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) is fighting to bring the wages of these workers in line with their counterparts in hospitals and for provisions that allow them to meet professional standards.



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