

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 February 2015

Latin America

Strike at Mexican university continues as administration rejects workers' latest proposal

The strike by administrative and manual workers at Yucatán Autonomous University (UADY) remains in force following the February 6 rejection by the rectory of the latest proposal by the workers' union, Autamuady. The rectory claimed that the demands were "unviable" and would put the sustainability of the university at risk and would "fracture the equilibrium with the rest of the workers."

The last point was a reference to the demand that wage disparities among the different classifications be revised. About 1,000 students, professors and workers had held a protest the day before over that demand, as well as to repudiate the rectory's effort to undercut the strike by offering classes off campus.

At the end of the march, Autamuady orators reiterated the demand for a 10 percent raise for union workers and criticized the high salaries of upper-level functionaries. Picket signs proclaimed, "We don't want alternate classrooms, we want our school," and "Education and Justice."

Strike, protests in Haiti against gas prices

Drivers of minibuses—called "tap-taps"—in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince struck February 3 to demand the lowering of prices for gasoline. Tap-taps, pickup trucks converted into colorfully painted minibuses, are the main form of public transportation in the capital and other cities. The striking drivers complained that fuel prices in Haiti have not reflected the drop in prices worldwide.

Three transport unions called for a two-day strike, despite a February 1 government attempt to avert the action by lowering gas and diesel prices by about 30 US cents per gallon. Traffic on the usually busy streets of the capital was slowed significantly. In some locations, police fired tear gas at protesters blocking streets with burning tires.

The unions cut the strike short on the second day when the government further lowered the price of gasoline to a little over US\$4.00 per gallon and diesel to about US\$3.30.

The reduction did not prevent a march and demonstration by at least 6,000 protesters in the capital on February 7. In addition to their demands for cuts in fuel prices, the angry protesters denounced the high cost of living under President Michel Martelly and called for his ouster. Martelly has ruled by decree since the parliament was dissolved last month and has delayed the holding of new elections.

Jamaican hotel workers strike over nonpayment of wages

Some 500 construction workers at the Moon Palace Jamaica Grande in Ocho Rios, St. Ann, downed their tools February 3. The workers, who are contracted for expanding and refurbishing the hotel, took the action to demand several weeks' worth of unpaid wages. On February 4, the striking workers blocked the hotel's entrance.

The workers, most of whom are contracted by a firm called Icon Construction, have also complained about other issues such as lack of security, health benefits and meal arrangements. Reportedly, Icon—as well as some small subcontractors—had not been paid by Moon Palace for weeks.

By February 5, Moon Palace had made arrangements to deposit the money in its bank, and the workers were paid, ending the strike. News sources did not report on whether the other issues were addressed.

Strike by Colombian municipal transit workers against pay delays

Workers for the Transit Institute of Cartago, a city in western Colombia, went on strike February 2 to demand the payment of eight months of wages, as well as health care coverage, risk pay and other benefits required by law.

The workers had gone on strike in December over the same issues but returned to work after receiving a promise of payment from the Institute's director, Edinson Medina.

One of the 38 striking workers, administrative technician Fulvio Galvis, told *El País*, "It's difficult because you arrive and the owner of the store closes the door, your friend doesn't want to see you because he knows you're going to ask for a loan, at home the situation with the kids and health is very difficult. We've put up with it; they always say to work but they don't give us a solution."

Medina has—yet again—called on the workers to return to their jobs but has not offered to meet and resolve the issues. The National Transit and Transport Employees Association (Andett) has offered to mediate. Robinson Franco, Andett vice president, said that "already the Attorney General's office is intervening and we're going to go to Bogotá to take the documentation and make the various reports directly before the AG, the Labor ministry and the International Labor Organization."

As of February 7, the workers were still on strike.

Strike by Guyanese university workers over salary demands

Workers at the University of Guyana (UG) in Georgetown

completed two weeks of a sit-in strike last Friday over failure to agree on pay. The workers' unions, the University of Guyana Senior Staff Association (UGSSA) and the University of Guyana Workers Union (UGWU), initially proposed a 60 percent wage hike, a 200 percent increase in travel allowances and duty-free concessions for eligible staffers. They have since changed the wage demand to 25 percent for each of the next three years.

The administration proposed a five percent increase this year and 10 percent for each of the next two years. However, on February 5, UG Vice Chancellor Jacob Opadeyi abruptly withdrew the pay offer and said that the university would not negotiate until the employees returned to work. He further claimed that blocking entrances was unlawful, implying that he would call police on the strikers.

The UG personnel department has already notified workers that their pay will be deducted for days on strike. Workers nonetheless voted to continue the strike, while at the same time the UGSSA and UGWU will request conciliation talks through the Chief Labour Officer.

Paraguayan hydroelectric workers strike over pay, labor contract demands

On Monday, February 2, workers at the Entidad Binacional Yacyretá hydroelectric plant, located on the Paraná River between Paraguay and Argentina, struck for a salary rise in line with a resolution of the plant's executive committee and the signing of a contract that would formalize labor conditions.

The striking workers were joined by peasant and social organizations, who called on the firm to provide help to the region's inhabitants, and not the "crumbs" that it has given out so far. They also demanded the payment of money owed to suppliers and the construction of a barrier strip to protect a nearby town from flooding.

Antiriot units of the National Police surrounded the plant headquarters in anticipation of the mobilization, but no disturbances were reported other than some heated verbal exchanges on February 4 during a blockage of a highway. However, some participants in the actions claimed that a management functionary tried to provoke an incident, and a reporter said that he was insulted and threatened by a police officer.

On February 3, the peasant and social groups signed an agreement with the company, ending their support for the strike.

Although the workers' union, Sipeby-Asu, had called for a 30-day walkout, by February 5 it lifted the strike following a meeting with the governor, a cabinet member, a legislator and Yacyretá representatives. The result of the meeting was the establishment of a negotiation board.

The United States

Two-day lockout of dockworkers on West Coast

The Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) carried through a two-day lockout of dockworkers at 29 West Coast ports February 7 and 8, as the group representing shippers escalates the drive to roll back past gains against the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU, according to the PMA, has been engaged in more than three months of a work slowdown which has caused

backups at the ports and slowed operations.

The PMA has reacted by cutting crews that load and unload ships to put pressure on the ILWU bureaucracy. "After three months of union slowdowns, it makes no sense to pay extra for less work," said PMA spokesman Wade Gates in the press release.

The two-day shutdown did not reach the level of previous lockouts, but, as one lobbyist for transport interests said, "I think what the PMA did yesterday was to say, 'Let's turn up the volume,' and they cranked it up pretty hard." According to the PMA, 10 issues remain unresolved and half of them find the two sides far apart.

For some time, the PMA has endeavored to take away control of the hiring hall from the ILWU and other past gains. In recent contract battles between the ILWU and grain shippers, elements of these past gains have been surrendered by ILWU, and now the PMA is seeking to make these losses universal all along the West Coast.

Canada

Strike Possible at Newfoundland Oil Refinery

United Steel Workers (USW) officials at Newfoundland's Come-by-Chance oil refinery have rejected a final offer from Silver Range Financial Partners, a New York based commodity hedge fund which recently purchased the North Atlantic facility from the Korean National Oil Corporation.

In its offer, the company failed to meet the union's wage increase demands. Should the impasse continue, the two sides are required by law to meet with a government conciliator before a strike vote can be held. It is estimated that a strike would not begin before mid-March. The refinery employs about 485 workers and can process up to 115,000 barrels per day. The deadlock at Come-by-Chance comes on the heels of a strike, entering its second week, by USW workers in the United States against oil giants Shell, BP, Exxon-Mobil, Husky and other refiners.

Lockout of Labrador Municipal Workers in Fourth Week

Forty-three outside workers—members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—will soon enter their second month of a lockout by the Happy Valley-Goose Bay municipal authority. The town is the largest population center in the region. CUPE members are required to provide essential, emergency road clearance but severe snow storms this winter have still left many roads virtually impassable.

Town Councilors are insisting that the unionized workers surrender their defined benefit pension plan in favour of a much inferior defined contributions plan for new employees. The push by employers to a two-tier pension system is rapidly becoming a common contractual demand by municipalities across the country. In Happy Valley-Goose Bay, the workers' pension plan is fully-funded at 109 percent, yet this has not prevented the employer from insisting on ending the current arrangement.

At the same time as insisting on contractual concessions from the workforce, town councilors recently voted to double their own salaries.



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