# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**17 February 2015**

Latin America

**Brazilian oil workers protest for back pay**

Demanding over a month's worth of back pay, about 200 contract workers at an oil refinery owned by the state-owned Petrobras firm protested February 10. The workers are employed by Petrobras contractor Alumini Engenharia, which has delayed paying over 2,300 workers at a petrochemical complex in Itaboraí, a city near Rio de Janeiro, where the protest took place.

The protesters shut down traffic on an 8-mile-long bridge and later marched to the Petrobras headquarters in downtown Rio.

Alumini claims that it has not paid the workers—or made severance payments to about 400 laid-off workers—because it has not been paid by Petrobras. Alumini has requested protection from the nation's bankruptcy court, and another Petrobras subcontractor, engineering firm OAS, is in the midst of bankruptcy negotiations for the same reason.

Petrobras, which accounts for 90 percent of Brazil's petroleum and owns all its refineries, has been embroiled in scandals, involving price fixing, bribery and kickbacks, that have sent its market value southward and caused a ripple effect among smaller banks and contracting firms.

In addition to the corruption, working conditions at Petrobras worksites have come under the spotlight. Following the sackings and resignations of several Petrobras executives, the new president, Aldemir Bendine, gave a TV interview February 10 in an attempt to calm investor fears and lessen public distrust. The next day, an explosion at an offshore Petrobras oil rig, likely caused by a gas leak, killed at least five workers and injured at least 26. Four workers are still unaccounted for.

**Homeless Brazilian workers occupy capital properties**

Some 3,000 Brazilian homeless workers and family members occupied six properties in the nation's capital Brasilia February 8. The action was coordinated by the Homeless Workers Movement, MTST, to promote its call for public housing and increased services.

Families set up tents and tarps on tracts of land in cities in the capital's metropolitan area: Brazlandia, Ceilandia, Planaltina, Recanto das Emas, Samambaia and Taguatinga.

An Associated Press report quoted one of the campers, Amanda Santana, a 39-year-old mother of three girls: "I came to Brasilia over 20 years ago and I've not been able to find housing. I work as a maid and on what I earn I can't pay rent. ... My only hope is to receive government housing."

By February 11, MTST and Brasilia authorities had struck a deal wherein the city promised to set aside land for low-cost housing … on the condition that the campers leave by February 14.

**Chilean prep school teachers strike, protesting salary discrimination**

Teachers at the elite Nido de Águilas (Eagle's Nest) International School in Santiago, Chile began a strike February 12 to protest salary discrimination. The teachers accuse the school—which offers classes from the preschool to high school level—of discrepancies of up to 100 percent in pay levels between foreign and Chilean teachers.

In a document submitted to the regional labor court, the school's Professors and Administrative Workers Association alleged that a foreign teacher with five year's seniority without a postgraduate degree earns around 2.5 million pesos (US$4,040) monthly compared to about 1.6 million pesos (US$2,585) for a native-born instructor. Union president Ramsey Lawrence told La Segunda that after disparities in benefits are taken into account, the gap showed "an obscene difference."

Native-born teachers account for 113 of educational staff, while 105 are from outside Chile. The administration justifies the salary differences as necessary to compete with private schools in Abu Dhabi, the Arab Emirates and Singapore, with the director stating "emphatically" that "there is no discrimination." Lawrence, an alumnus and history professor, said, "They have screamed at us, treated us as 'immature,' they have said that we are biting the hand that feeds us."

In contract negotiations, the administration offered a 2.5 percent salary increase and, in a paper that was not to be included in the contract, 60 scholarships for children of employees.

Picketers assembled outside the school, with some carrying banners proclaiming, "In this nest not all the eagles are equal."

**Strike by Guyanese university workers continues despite back-to-work order**

Workers at the University of Guyana (UG) remained on strike last week, refusing a February 11 back-to-work call from the Labour Ministry. The ministry, in a letter to University of Guyana Senior Staff Association (UGSSA) and the University of Guyana Workers Union (UGWU), claimed that the unions had not requested third-party intervention as talks stalled, and that the workers must resume their work and request mediation.

The workers first held sit-in actions beginning January 26 to protest lack of progress in wage talks. They escalated to a full-blown strike after the UG vice chancellor, Jacob Opadeyi, shut down negotiations February 5 and said that they would not be restarted until the workers returned to their jobs.

The unions, in a letter to the chief labour officer, replied that they have requested conciliation talks several times since 2012, but have been "confronted with a plethora of excuses and delays despite repeated requests for negotiation meetings." UGSSA president Melissa Ifill said, "We are committed to staying on the picket line until an offer is made," but added that "we are willing to entertain an interim offer while we

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negotiate."

**Protests by Mexican teachers over fee-based teachers ends with agreement**

Teachers from the Mexican state of Oaxaca converged on Mexico City February 9 to carry out protests against the policy of hiring teachers without putting them on the official payroll. The teachers, members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE), set up a camp on the Paseo de la Reforma thoroughfare, but later moved out when threatened with forced removal.

The teachers marched the next day, demanding that the 3,000 teachers who work in the mostly poor rural areas in Oaxaca be given official payroll status. Currently, working under a system of fees, these teachers are deprived of benefits and bonuses.

CNTE negotiators met with government officials in the Government Secretariat headquarters and left with promises to pay Christmas bonuses to the fee-based teachers, integrate them into the official payroll and review the state's education law. The repeal of the federal education reform law, a centerpiece of the Piña Nieto administration, was among the demands at the protest, but it was not addressed. Neither was the demand for nonrecognition of the corporatist National Educational Workers Union (SNTE).

CNTE Teachers in Oaxaca, on strike beginning February 9, returned to work on the 12th. Some CNTE members considered the results of the mobilizations to be "insufficient" and advocated a "more forceful" plan of action to be devised at future assemblies.

The United States

**Baggage handlers at New York airport hold one-day protest strike**

About 30 contract workers at British Airways held a one-day strike February 12 at John F. Kennedy airport in New York City to protest abysmal wages and a hostile working environment. The workers make about $10 an hour and are seeking union representation with the Service Employees International Union.

Aviation Safeguards, the contractor, provides about 100 baggage handlers to British Airways and United Airlines at JFK airport. "We … know because of the value of our work that we should be paid a lot better for what we do," a worker told the *Guardian*. "We know that the airlines, not only do they make millions, they make billions, billions of dollars. We don't get to see nothing."

Workers carried signs saying, "Stop Illegal Threats" and charge Aviation Safeguards sent a letter to workers threatening consequences, including termination, for striking and speaking out. The company responded that the letter only sought to spell out the possibilities open to the company under the Railway Labor Act. "We want to make sure the employees are aware and not surprised by what the law is, said CEO Craig Coy.

Canada

**Ontario community care workers end strike**

After 16 days on the picket lines, 3,000 community care nurses will return to work today. On Sunday, the Ontario Nurses Association agreed to enter arbitration with the employer. The health care workers have been working without a contract since March of last year.

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, nine of which went on strike. The health care workers are fighting to bring their wages in line with their counterparts in hospitals and for provisions that allow them to meet professional standards. Employers had denied the workers a meager 1.4 percent increase.

**New strikes in Northern municipalities**

Thirty municipal workers in Hay River, North-West Territories (NWT) are in the second week of a strike against the town council in a dispute over wages. The workers have been without a contract since 2013.

With the cost of living inordinately high in northern Canadian communities, the Hay River municipality first offered no wage increases over a three-year contract. With a strike then threatened, the employer upped its offer to 1 percent for each of the three years. After the first week on strike, officials for the Union of Northern Workers reduced their wage demand to 2 percent for each year of the contract.

In Fort Smith, NWT, housing authority workers, also organized by the Union of Northern Workers, are also on strike for a minimal wage increase.

Meanwhile, in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 43 outside workers—members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—have had a month-long lockout lifted after agreeing to a tentative agreement this past weekend. No details of the deal were released.

Town Councillors had insisted that the unionized workers surrender their defined benefit pension plan in favor 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.

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