

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 September 2015

## Mexican health workers strike for overdue pay, workplace improvements

Workers in the National Health Secretariat in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico stopped work August 28 over a number of demands. In addition to the punctual payment of wages, the health workers' demands include monthly incentive pay, provision of uniforms, rehabilitation and expansion of physical areas, proper maintenance of vehicles and promotions for qualified workers.

"The employees complain of the lack of supplies to carry out their daily activities and even overcrowding in the offices," reported xeu.com.mx, "for which reason in the whole state in the 11 health jurisdictions these demonstrations ... are taking place." Health workers in Coatzacoalcos, Orizaba and other cities went on strike at dozens of health centers over the same demands.

The Xalapa workers are members of Section 26 of the National Health Secretariat Workers Union (SNTSA). SNTSA has not declared an official strike, and the union is telling its workers not to give interviews to the media. Nevertheless, workers have appeared outside their workplaces carrying signs with their demands. Workers complained to reporters that despite the arrival of the new health secretary, they have not received a response to petitions that they handed over to the ministry back in November.

## Two-day strike at Costa Rican hospital over job security

Workers in the cleaning, security, pharmacy and IT departments of the Calderon Guardia Hospital in San Jose, Costa Rica walked off the job August 27 to oppose a plan to farm out services. The workers are members of the Undeca national social security system workers union.

There are over 120 employees "who work in an interim form and as substitutes for fixed employees," according to *La Nación*. Undeca expressed fears that the cleaning and security staff at an addition to the hospital currently under construction would consist of subcontracted workers and that the interim workers would be fired, a charge management denied.

The walkout began at 6 a.m., but the parties returned to negotiations at 1 p.m. After five hours, however, the talks were broken off and the strike continued, with each side accusing the other of causing the breakdown.

The next day, after several hours of negotiation, Undeca and management came to an agreement "that includes as a principal

point the commitment not to contract outsourced workers to provide services in the new building that will host the nutrition and clothing areas."

## Argentine sugar refinery locks out workers following strike vote

Shortly before Argentina's Sugar Workers Syndicate was to formally announce an indefinite strike, sugar refinery Tabacal Agroindustria released a statement August 27 declaring that it was "obliged to carry out the closing and stoppage" of its sugar processing plant in Tucuman. The statement followed a general assembly in which union members voted for the strike.

Union and Tabacal representatives have held 20 meetings over a new contract, with negotiations stalling over wages. The union demanded a 36 percent hike, while Tabacal would go no further than 33.9 percent. The union had formalized the strike with the legally required notification to the Labor Ministry five days beforehand, and the ministry ratified it on August 26.

The statement claimed that the firm "must preserve people's integrity, protect equipment and installations, thus also minimize environmental risks or possible pollution since, as is public knowledge, it has to do with a strike of indeterminate length." Tabacal also declared that, "as is normal," it would not pay for days on strike, attendance and other bonuses. If an agreement is not signed soon, Tabacal has threatened to withhold retroactive wages as well as the aguinaldo, or end-of-year bonus.

## Uruguay: Teachers defy education ministry's illegalization of strikes

Following months of strikes and protest actions by Uruguay's teachers, the government declared education an essential service on August 24 after a meeting that included the president and the education minister. Education and Culture Minister Maria Julia Munoz, claiming the "obligation to ensure that all children and teenagers attend class," said that the ban on teacher strikes would be in effect for 30 days.

Munoz's announcement followed the rejection by the rank and file of an agreement that the government had reached with the PIT-CNT federation and the Fenapes high school teachers union. The

starting salary is currently 21,000 pesos (US\$730) a month; teachers want 30,000 (US\$1,040). Regarding the government's offer of 24,700 pesos (US\$868), Munoz admitted, "Nobody is saying that it's a great salary," but said that the government could not offer more.

Unions have denounced the decree, with the ADES high school teachers union stating that industrial actions "in no way affect the life, safety or health of our students." Defying the declaration of essentiality, the teachers went on a one-day strike nationwide on August 27. Demonstrations against the decree were joined by student groups and labor unions.

On August 29, the Uruguayan Teachers Federation, FUM, voted in assembly to a one-day strike some time this week. So far, the government has not sanctioned the teachers.

### **Paper workers strike Washington state plant over contract concessions**

Some 800 workers at KapStone's pulp and paper mill in Longview, Washington walked out on strike August 29 over benefits and other contract issues. The Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, which represents the striking workers, is calling the action an unfair labor practices strike.

The union claims the company illegally outsourced bargaining unit jobs to outside contractors and has refused to negotiate 194 different rules and policies in the current negotiations. But the attempt to impose a greater burden of health care costs on workers appears to be a major factor in the rejection of the contract by 68 percent of the membership.

Hundreds of jobs were eliminated and workers lost their guaranteed pension plan just before the previous owner sold the plant to KapStone in 2013. KapStone, headquartered in Illinois, is the fifth-largest producer of containerboard and corrugated packaging products and the largest craft paper producer in the United States. It operates four paper mills and a number of other plants and distribution centers that employ some 6,200 workers.

### **Workers strike Texas nuclear weapons plant**

Workers at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant in Amarillo, Texas voted to strike Consolidated Nuclear Security (CNS) and walked off the job August 29. The 1,200 workers, represented by 10 different unions under the Metal Trades Council, rejected the company's second "last, best and final" offer by a 3 to 1 vote and then voted by the required two-thirds majority to strike.

CNS's recent offer conceded 3 percent wage increases in each year of a four-year agreement. But the company is seeking to cut costs by \$3 billion and its demands for health care benefit concessions were unacceptable to workers.

Clarence Rashada, president of the Metal Trades Council, said

workers in the nuclear plant face considerable health dangers. He made the point, with considerable understatement, saying, "If you're coming in young, you may over 20 or 30-plus years contract some kind of illness from the hazards in some kind of way and you want to be taken care of." According to the union, 1,300 workers have become ill during or after their employment at Pantex.

### **Ontario Children's Aid workers set to strike**

Workers at the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of Algoma in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario could be on strike this week after working without a contract since April of this year.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), whose negotiators say they are not being taken seriously and that wages are the least of their concerns. The employer says that because of a new restrictive funding formula from the provincial Liberal government, they are not able to meet union demands for the increased staffing they say is needed to provide a safe work environment.

A strike would limit some services that are currently provided, but management has said they will fill in to provide essential services as needed.

### **Strike looms for Ontario long-term care workers**

Over 200 workers employed by Community Living Huronia (CLH) in Midland, Ontario, north of Toronto, are set to take strike action if a deal isn't reached in the next three weeks.

Their union, the Ontario Public Service Alliance Union, had originally set a strike date of August 31. However, when a tentative deal was nearly unanimously rejected by the membership they postponed that deadline and will put the deal to another vote this week in a ploy to push it through. Workers are fighting a raft of concession demands that include the elimination of some health care benefits and reductions to allowable sick days.

Management has said they will fill in for frontline workers in the event of a strike at CLH, which provides care at 20 homes in the region for the physically and mentally disabled.



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