

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 September 2015

Mexican university workers strike for benefits, working conditions

Support and assistance staff workers at several campuses of Mexico's National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) in Mexico City began a strike on September 3. The work stoppage began at the Superior School of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering (ESIME) and spread to at least six other IPN establishments in the course of the day.

The workers are members of the National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE) and call themselves the Democratic Delegations Bloc of Section 11. They began the strike to demand better working conditions and benefits, which have been under attack. They also are calling for facilities for the admission of their children in IPN, better salaries and the provision of uniforms and dressing rooms. Another crucial demand is the expulsion of the private Banking and Industrial Police (PBI) from IPN campuses.

The demands stem from an agreement signed between SNTE and the general management on June 1 that has not been complied with. Unions and management reps entered negotiations while the strike continued.

Argentine zoo employees hold one-day strike for better pay and conditions

Workers at the Buenos Aires Zoo went on strike September 4, shutting down the premises, the first industrial action in its hundred-year history. The workers demanded the payment of overdue wages, raises and improved working conditions. In addition, the strike was called to protest the maltreatment of the animals.

According to a diarioz.com.ar report, the zoo, which was granted as a concession to Mexican multibillionaire Carlos Slim in 2012, "has been in the eye of the storm in recent months." Workers denounced the current zoo director for "a network of illegal trafficking in endangered species" and for having authorized the filming of a movie on the premises that was denounced by environmentalists for its harmful effects on the animals.

In December, a polar bear died "due to the bad living conditions" and two sea lions perished in August, according to a local legislator. The legislator, Adrian Camps, accused the government of conservative mayor Mauricio Macri of making a "grave error" in 2012 and called for the abrogation of the concession, in effect until 2017, and an investigation of the sea lions' deaths.

Uruguayan secondary teachers end strike over salaries, education budget, but continue protests

After over two weeks on strike, members of Uruguay's ADES secondary teachers union voted on the night of September 2 to return to work. The Association of University Functionaries (Afutu) of Montevideo, which had been out since August 22, came to the same decision. The education workers had walked out to press their salary and education budget demands.

The unions demand a minimum salary of 30,000 pesos (US\$1,040) while the government offer is for 25,000 pesos (US\$865) to be reached incrementally by the end of the term of president Tabare Vazquez in 2020. The vote followed the announcement by the Labor Ministry that it would withdraw its salary offer if the striking teachers and staff did not return to their workplaces.

Another demand by the unions is the allotting of 6 percent of GDP toward education in the upcoming five-year budget. The government proposes conditioning salary hikes to meeting educational goals and a promise not to strike.

Union director Julio Moreira claimed that despite the climb-down, "Simply a new stage has begun," with protest actions replacing the strike. Some teachers have held temporary strikes, while some unions and students gathered at the Executive Tower in Montevideo and marched to the Legislative Palace on September 4.

Guyanese sugarcane harvesters strike over inadequate pay for working in abnormal conditions

On August 31, over 500 sugarcane harvesters at the Uitvlugt Estate in Guyana's Demerara region downed their tools following management's refusal to pay them extra for working in abnormal conditions. The work stoppage lasted until September 5, when the workers' union and management reached a deal.

When the workers came to work on the August 31, they encountered vines and grasses in the fields between the crops, making harvesting more difficult. As is customary, the workers met with management to discuss extra pay that they usually get for working under abnormal conditions. Management's offer was considered inadequate, so the workers went on strike to demand double-time.

Meetings between workers' representatives, Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) officials and Estate management reached no resolution. However, on September 5, GAWU officials announced that an agreement had been reached and ordered the cane harvesters back to work.

"However," noted the *Guyana Times*, "it is unclear whether the cane harvesters have agreed to this new arrangement." No amount has been agreed upon yet. "Meanwhile," according to the *Times*, "union representatives, management of the Estate and a team from the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) will be visiting the cane fields to assess the conditions on the ground before agreeing to a revised payment sum."

Union officials end Washington state paper mill strike after mass picketing

The 800 workers at KapStone's pulp and paper mill in Longview, Washington started returning to work this week after the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW) union issued a letter to the company offering an unconditional return to work on September 3. Workers will now return to work under the concessions contract imposed by the company that triggered the strike back on August 29.

Under the return to work, the AWPPW retains its unfair labor practices case but the company is technically not required to bargain. Had the company refused to accept a return to work, the strike would have been converted into a lockout and workers would have been eligible for compensation.

The rapid ending of the strike by the AWPPW came after a series of events that were touched off on August 30 when a contractor's vehicle struck a picketing worker, Steve Blanchard. The pickup bumped into Blanchard, accelerated and he was "thrown across the road," according to a police report.

The action led to angry mass picketing by workers. Appearing before a Superior Court judge, Kapstone's attorney alleged workers smashed picket signs on vehicles and intimidated strikebreakers. "This is lawlessness. This is

violence," he declared.

The union's attorney responded, "The union has been diligent in trying to monitor its own troops" and said the strike in reality had been "remarkably" peaceful given the circumstances. Judge Stephen Warning replied, "Both sides have made some thoughtful efforts to control a difficult situation," but warned that any further confrontations in violation of his restraining order would be met with "draconian" fines.

Ontario school support workers take job action

Fifty-five thousand education workers in at least four school boards in Ontario will begin limited job action this week including work-to-rule with a possible escalation into the school year.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which has not given any further details regarding the current job action, but have said that the next step would be rotating strikes possibly leading to a province-wide strike.

The workers affected include educational assistants, administrators, trades people, technicians and custodians among others, in both levels of the public and Catholic school boards and in both French and English systems.

Blood service workers on strike in PEI

Eleven workers with Canadian Blood Services (CBS) in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, are on strike this week after working without a contract since March of 2011.

According to their union, the Nova Scotia Union of Public and Private Employees (NSUPE), the main issue in the dispute is maintaining a minimum number of work hours for the strikers who are already only part-time phlebotomists and support staff.

CBS says there will be no interruption to the blood supply although blood will not be collected and any scheduled donors will be contacted during the strike.



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