

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 September 2015

Latin America

Strike by Mexican education workers following failed contract talks

After a meeting with the State Education Secretariat (SEE) failed to reach an agreement, members of the Education Workers of Michoacán Syndicate (STEM) went on strike September 11.

STEM has demanded a revision of labor conditions for over 20,000 education workers in the state—2,500 of whom are in STEM—mainly in the form of increased resources from the state government. The government claims that it does not have the money to carry out the demands, all of which conform to federal labor law, known as the General Labor Conditions (CGT).

The State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration has classified the strike as legal due to management's refusal to budge from its position. A section of STEM known as D-III-6 occupied SEE offices, and the strike has been extended beyond September 11.

Salvadoran city workers on indefinite strike over delayed salaries

Workers for the mayor's office of Santiago de Maria, Usulután department, El Salvador went on indefinite strike September 11 to demand payment of overdue wages. The city workers have not been paid since May, and have received no response from the mayor's office to their queries about when they will be paid.

The workers maintain that they will remain on strike until they receive their wages.

Peruvian health sector workers hold 24-hour national strike over unfulfilled contract provisions

Workers in Peru's health sector struck nationwide September 9 over unfulfilled promises that the government signed onto last year. More than 20,000 workers walked out to demand that the government keep the promises it made to end an 18-day strike in July 2014.

According to report, a telesurtv.net "The workers include obstetricians, psychologists, social workers, chemists, biologists, and medical technicians." Despite many having advanced degrees, "their average salary is around US\$700 a month."

Primary demands include a wage hike and standardization, reclassification of temporary employees, expanded bonus payments, infrastructure improvements and additional personnel. The Health Ministry had its budget cut last year by the Economics Ministry, and the 2016 budget is projected to be even lower.

Brazilian cabbies continue protests against ride-share service

On September 9, the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city, were blocked by thousands of taxi drivers protesting the presence of the Uber ride-sharing service. The cabbies demanded that Uber and similar services be banned from the city. Because Uber drivers are not subject to the same laws, inspections and fees as traditional taxi services—and as "contractors" do not receive benefits—the cabbies complain that they are taking away business and undercutting their livelihoods.

Uber and other ride-sharing services continue to grow in popularity, though in some countries, such as India, Uber drivers have protested over pay discrepancies and other issues.

The action took place the day before a city council vote on banning Uber and other Smartphone-based services. City councils in Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia and Belo Horizonte have voted to ban the service—though Rio is awaiting approval by the mayor, who has not made up his mind yet—and there are anti-Uber laws pending in 13 state capitals. The proposed ban in Sao Paulo would carry a fine of 1,700 reais (US\$450) and confiscation of the owner's vehicle.

Trinidadian highway construction workers protest unsettled grievances

Early in the morning of September 11, hundreds of highway construction workers in Trinidad converged on the headquarters of their employer, OAS Constructora, a Brazilian firm contracted for a highway extension project. The workers had heard through media and the Internet that OAS was planning on moving out of the project without resolving a number of labor issues.

The company, which is facing corruption charges and bankruptcy in Brazil, did not respond to inquiries. The president of the National Infrastructure Development Company Limited, Dr. Carlson Charles, claimed that there was no need for the workers to stop work, and that no jobs were at risk. He added that workers were “responding to rumors” and “overacting.”

Charles’ protestations failed to quell the workers’ unease. Some of the outstanding issues include short pay, delays in performance appraisals, nonpayment of benefits, health and safety concerns, displacement of workers and victimization by a senior management official. Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU) branch president Ronald Garcia complained that “expatriates” were brought in and alleged that a “language barrier” existed between local and foreign workers.

The workers set up a protest camp outside OAS headquarters in Golconda while a meeting was held the night of September 11, but no resolution was reached. Garcia told reporters that “no work will continue until we have some agreement with management.”

The United States

Tentative agreement brings Pasco, Washington teachers’ strike to an end

A tentative agreement was reached in the early morning hours of September 13, bringing to an end the eight-day strike by 1,160 teachers in Pasco, Washington. The agreement, whose details are confidential, comes in the wake of a determined rebuff by teachers of fines and a court order to return to work.

Teachers walked off the job September 1 bringing a halt to instruction for 17,000 students. Three days later, Franklin County Superior Court Judge Alex Ekstrom declared the strike illegal and ordered teachers back to

work. But on September 7 in a voice vote, teachers delivered an overwhelming rejection to the back to work order. On September 11, Judge Ekstrom fined the union \$8,000 and has said that individual leaders could face additional fines.

Two days later, the Pasco Association of Educators, the union representing striking teachers, and the school board reached the tentative agreement. Teachers are to begin returning to work over a two-day period starting on September 15.

The last agreement released by the school board called for 10 percent wage increases over the course of a three-year agreement. But teachers were opposed to language governing class sizes, performance and the allocation of money for curriculum. Union president Greg Olson said, “We need timelines, we need it structured. They want it open-ended. We want it tied down.”

Canada

University support staff take job action in BC

Picket lines went up last week at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in British Columbia when support staff staged two days of job action after working without a contract since April of 2014.

Negotiators for the Teaching Support Staff Union at SFU say that despite ongoing negotiations since that time, little progress has been made toward a new agreement. The main issues in dispute include seniority and access to work and benefits for grad students.

While the union says it has made significant concessions on a number of issues, SFU administration have consistently demonstrated a determination to go to arbitration rather than negotiating a new contract.



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