

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 December 2015

Mexican municipal workers strike to demand pay, bonus

Municipal workers for the town of Jalenco, in the Mexican state of Mexico, went on strike and occupied the municipal palace December 15 to demand the payment of their salaries. The workers, some of whom pitched tents around and in the building, also demanded the customary end-of-year bonus, called aguinaldo, that authorities have not paid.

The workers “accused the PRI town councilor Gabino Pardines Rodríguez of receiving a gross monthly salary of 75,000 pesos (US\$4,400) when this municipality is among the smallest in the state of Mexico and confronts grave financial problems,” reported *México Informa*. The workers’ union is demanding an investigation into alleged mishandling of at least 300,000 pesos (US\$17,300) by the town’s treasurer as well.

Mexican university workers strike, protest delay in payment of year-end bonus

Teachers, administrative staff and service workers at five campuses of Mexico’s State University of Sonora (UES) struck December 16 to demand the payment of their year-end bonus.

A union delegate, Juana Alvarado Gándara, told reporters that the workers took the decision after the 4:00 deadline for a response from the administration regarding their demand passed with no answer.

Colombian hospital workers strike for unpaid wages

Medical workers at hospitals and National Health Superintendency (EPS) facilities in Colombia’s Antioquia department struck December 16 to demand overdue salaries.

At the San Vicente de Paúl Hospital in Barbosa, 45 professionals contracted through the Balboa Corporation, who were owed 243 million pesos (US\$73,000) for wages in November, went on strike. Balboa, which has more than 20 clients in Colombia, contracts workers in health care services, external consultations, hospitalization and gynecology, among others.

At two hospitals, Marco Fidel Suárez in Bello and San Rafael in Itagüí, anesthesiologists only assisted in surgeries. “In this sense,

each week 450 surgical interventions are affected,” reported noticiascaracol.com.

The total salary debt for the three hospitals is 700 million pesos (US\$210,330).

Blockade by Argentine subway security workers over firings

At 6:00 a.m. on December 17, security workers in the Buenos Aires subway system stopped work, picketed and blockaded a station on Line B, the city’s most traveled commuter line. The workers held the action to protest the firings of 27 of their coworkers by Comahue and Briefing, two firms that contract security personnel.

A communiqué by the workers stated that for six months “the government as much as these businesses have turned deaf ears to our complaints, and have left us no alternative so that our families do not spend the end of the year in the streets. They are responsible to come up with a solution.”

About the recent firings, one worker said, “They do it to take people who don’t know the contract and that way they work days of more than 12 hours without extra pay.”

One of the fired workers, Emmanuel Escobar, told reporters, “What we want is continuity of all our positions and their regularization; therefore we’re going to cut Line B service for an indefinite time until they give us a response.”

Metrovías, the privately-owned company that operates the port city’s underground rail system, or subte, accused the workers of “holding users hostage” and called for the Metropolitan Police to intervene. At the Federico Lacroze station, workers denounced the dispatch of over 20 police who attempted to dislodge them and prevented the media from getting on the platform.

At 3:30 p.m. the workers announced the end of the mobilization, and by 4:00 p.m. the trains were running.

Chilean airport workers strike over pension system

Administrative workers for Chile’s General Civil Aeronautic Board (DGAC) began a two-day national strike at midnight, December 17. The walkout followed two months of fruitless negotiations between National DGAC Functionaries Association (ANFDGAC) reps and DGAC, the consequence of a September 15

strike.

Air traffic controllers, who had participated in the previous one-day strike in September, are currently in separate negotiations with the government and have refused to participate in the strike.

Prensa Latina reported, “The DGAC workers, except for the air traffic controllers who did not join the strike, demand to be assimilated into the pension system of the Armed Forces, abandoning the private one, based on the individual capitalization of funds of each affiliate.” The private system was imposed in 1985 during the Pinochet dictatorship.

The government of president Michelle Bachelet refused to consider the demand, claiming that it would be too expensive. Defense Minister José Antonio Gómez, saying that it was “inconceivable that they hold Chileans hostage to ... seek benefits that go way beyond those that most Chileans have,” dispatched Air Force personnel to perform some of the jobs, a move that was denounced by ANFDGAC as jeopardizing air traffic safety. On December 19, ANFDGAC declared the strike indefinite “until the government responds with something concrete.”

Trinidadian forestry workers protest nonpayment of wages

On December 16, placard-carrying Forestry Division workers marched and protested in the city of San Fernando, Trinidad to demand the payment of overdue fortnightly paychecks. The forestry workers had not received their wages since September, when the People’s National Movement party took power in national elections.

Faced with the embarrassing sight of hungry workers weeping and rolling on the road over national television, and of others complaining of evictions and lack of food for their families, the Ministry of Agriculture announced that the checks would be delivered. Agriculture Minister Avinash Singh blamed the previous People’s Partnership government, claiming that the incoming government “had inherited some challenges in paying unpaid debts,” according to a *Newsday* report.

Some 2,000 workers, averaging about 1,200 Trinidadian dollars (US\$189) per fortnight, have been affected by the pay delay.

Singh, though he claimed that the ministry has been “working religiously” to get the pay delivered, only promised to pay the workers “before Christmas.”

Airline suspends more than 100 workers, alleging illegal work stoppage

Southwest Airlines suspended 105 ramp workers last week claiming they took part in an illegal work stoppage back on November 18. The incident referred to by the airline, which is also taken up in a lawsuit against Transit Workers Union (TWU) Local 555, stems from what the company calls a sickout that affected

Southwest’s operations at four airports in Southern California. Not a single worker showed up for work at the Burbank Bob Hope Airport, forcing Southwest to rush in managers and other personnel to fill the void.

The TWU was holding a single meeting attended by 350 workers the same day in Southern California to report on contract negotiations between the union and Southwest that have dragged on for four years without resolution. Southwest is apparently alleging that by calling a single meeting, the TWU encouraged union members working at that time to use personal time off to attend.

On November 19, Southwest placed 200 workers on paid leave and conducted interviews. Based on those interviews, the company determined 105 workers abused personal time off to carry out an illegal job action and has implemented suspensions of between 45 and 90 days. The TWU counters that some of the victimized workers who used personal time off did not even attend the meeting.

Under the Railway Labor Act airline unions can legally strike only after federal mediators declare an impasse. The TWU and Southwest have been in mediated talks since 2012.

Southwest has been profitable in the recent period and is currently in negotiations with two other bargaining units—12,000 flight attendants and 8,000 pilots. Both groups rejected tentative contract proposals this past summer.

BC Library workers push for strike

Over 200 workers employed at the Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL) which is based in Nanaimo, British Columbia delivered an overwhelming vote of 96.1 percent in favor of strike action last week after working without a contract since the end of last year.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and 70 percent of them only work part time. The vote came in response to a concession-laden contract proposal by VIRL that did not address key issues around benefits and scheduling. Although no strike date has yet been set, union negotiators say the employer needs to get back to the table and negotiate seriously.

Serving a total population of over 430,000, VIRL has 39 branch locations across Vancouver Island as well as a book-by-mail service to remote communities.



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