

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 December 2015

Colombian health, education, and transit workers protest over unpaid wages

Health workers in three cities in the Department of Córdoba in Northwest Colombia went on strike last week over unpaid wages. Management of the hospitals in Tierralta, Sahagún, and Cereté explained that the hospitals have been left without funds because the agencies that disburse the money have not done so. At Cereté Hospital, a union spokesperson pointed out that the health facility's 600 employees are owed four months' pay plus the Christmas bonus.

Employees at Tierra Alta and Sahagún are also owed several months pay. Striking workers have indicated their willingness to stay off the job until they are paid.

Meanwhile, teachers and clerks in the city of southern city of Florencia continue to protest over unpaid wages. They are demanding that the city pay them their December wages and vacation pay for the end-of-year holidays.

Teacher pickets have set up camp in the plaza across from City Hall in protest. A union spokesperson indicated that the protest would continue until the educators and clerks' grievances are resolved.

In addition, the teachers plan to begin 2016 with a strike against Florencia public schools. The 1,300 school employees are owed 6.65 billion pesos (2.2 million US dollars).

Transit workers in the city of Cali, the third most populated city in Colombia, continue with their month-long strike against Unimetro, one of the four private transit companies that operate in Cali. Last week, drivers and bus cleaners employed by Unimetro joined the job action.

The original walkout involved 54 workers, stopping the operation of 80 busses. It now involves 120 workers and 120 busses. The strike has all but paralyzed bus service in western Cali.

The issue in the strike is back-wages owed to the workers. Unimetro has also defaulted in its share for workers' social security, and other benefits.

Argentine government workers announce national strike

The Association of Government Employees (ATE) has set a protest national strike for Tuesday December 29 to protest the decision by Andrés Ibarra, Minister of Modernization for the newly installed government of President Macri, to look over the contracts of recently hired government workers and to "automatically fire" those that collect a paycheck without doing any work, known as "gnocchi" employees in Argentina. The revision affects 24,000 workers hired during the last years of the administration of president Cristina Fernandez.

An ATE spokesperson declared that the union would defend every employee and that no mass layoffs would be accepted. While the ATE opposes the presence of "gnocchi" employees, it fears that the government is setting its sights on the tens of thousands of contingent and part-time workers that work as needed, without many contractual rights.

Last week there were walkouts of public employees in several provinces to protest plans to increase the use of contingent workers.

Mexican teachers threaten strike

The leaders of the National Coordinating Committee Education Workers (CNTE) in Michoacan State, Juan José Ortega Madrigal, declared last week that the CNTE is prepared to launch a national strike as soon as the first teacher is sacked for not following the evaluation protocol.

The CNTE, which represents many education workers in southern Mexico, has been battling the government of president Enrique Peña Nieto over the implementation of an education law that mandates teacher evaluations. Following mass protests last year, the arrest of CNTE leaders, and repression against teachers, many teachers have complied with the evaluation order.

Union leader attacked in Zacatecas, Mexico

Early Thursday morning last week the home Alejandro Rivera Nieto, leader of the Independent Union of Government

Workers, was riddled with bullets and his car set on fire after being doused with gasoline. The attack followed by a few hours his participation in demonstrations by state and municipal workers across from the residence of Zacatecas State governor Miguel Alonzo Reyes and in front of the state legislature. Nieto, who was not hurt, said he suspected that the governor and his secretary Jaime Santoyo Castro were behind the attack.

On Wednesday, Rivera Neto had led a mobilization of municipal workers from the city of Ojocaliente that had picketed the governor and the state legislature. The demonstrators denounced Ojocaliente municipal leader Ivan Vitar Soto, for corruption and demanded payment of back wages. They are owed for November and December.

The police first tried to block the workers from marching to the government house. The issue seemed at least partially resolved when a state official appeared and declared that Zacatecas State would lend Ojocaliente the money to pay the workers.

Hours later, Rivera Nieto's home was attacked. Following the events, state officials denied having repressed the workers' protest. Secretary Santoyo also denied the governor's involvement and accused the union leader of having himself staged the assault.

State officials had previously threatened to arrest and prosecute Rivera Nieto and demanded that the union he represents remove him from office.

Veracruz State retirees battle police over pensions

Last Wednesday Veracruz State police attacked protesting pensioners in downtown Xalapa, the state capital. The protesters had been blocking streets in Xalapa since Monday, demanding that the state government, of governor Javier Duarte, pay them their pensions. One third of Veracruz's 27,000 state pensioners have yet to be paid.

As retirees were battling the police, an angry retired woman climbed the COPIPEV (the retirees union) platform, took the mike and declared that "today there is no turkey, no cake, no candles; we are repressed, we are beaten by those who enjoy wealth for themselves (and for five generations to come)," a clear reference to the corrupt governor Duarte, who rules over Veracruz State like a personal fiefdom.

The Mexico City magazine *Proceso* quoted other demonstrators who made reference to the act of repression carried out by Duarte a day after he dined with officials of the Catholic Church in Veracruz.

On Thursday, Holy Night, security forces were all over Xalapa, to prevent further street protests and to prevent retirees from blocking the road to the port of Veracruz.

Southwest Airlines and union reach tentative agreement in wake of worker suspensions

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 555 announced December 23 that it had reached an "agreement in principle" with Southwest Airlines covering 12,000 ramp workers after three years of mediated talks. Airline management confirmed the agreement, but along with the union, provided no details.

The agreement by the TWU comes on the heels of a company suspension of 105 workers over an alleged sick-out back on November 18. Southwest is seeking to tamp down demands for increases among ramp workers along with pilot and flight attendant unions under conditions where it is making profits.

The TWU leadership will meet December 29 to vote whether to put the agreement to the rank and file for a vote. The union has not revealed whether the suspensions without pay, which range from 45 to 90 days, will remain in place or be rescinded under the new agreement.

Montreal workers fight illegal suspension

Over 2,400 workers employed by the city of Montreal have had their suspensions upheld following an unsuccessful appeal by their union to the Labour Relations Board to have the suspensions declared illegal lockouts.

Denis Coderre, the mayor of Montreal, suspended the municipal workers for 36 hours in most cases—though some union leaders were suspended for up to two months—for attending a two-hour assembly during work hours on December 8. That meeting was called by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the bargaining agent for the workers.

The union has condemned the suspensions for being overly punitive and called them illegal, because with qualified workers off the job some services that are deemed essential such as water supply could not be delivered.



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