

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 January 2016

Mexico: Municipal workers demand Christmas bonuses

Employees of the city of Chiconcuac in México state blocked the Texcoco-Lechería Highway demanding the payment of their traditional *aguinaldo* (Christmas bonus) on December 30.

The demonstration is an escalation of a series of rallies at City Hall over the nonpayment of the bonus, which was due on December 20. The nonpayment affects 130 municipal employees. In nearby Tlalnepantla de Baz, 6,000 workers have neither received *aguinaldos*, nor vacation pay, nor their regular bi-weekly paycheck.

Workers in other cities in México state (including Tlalnepantla, Atizapán de Zaragoza, Ecatepec, Metepec, Valle de Chalco, Los Reyes La Paz, Coacalco, Almoloya de Juárez, Jaltenco, Ixtlahuaca and Ocoyoacac) are facing similar conditions of delays in pay. In several other cities (including Tlalnepantla, Atizapán and Naucalpan) refuse collection has stopped due to lack of funds to purchase fuel for trucks.

In Atizapán refuse truck drivers blocked a main highway in Mexico state to protest a 30 million peso debt to the 150 employees of the Eiffel refuse company. The workers are owed six months wages, *aguinaldo* and vacation pay.

Retirees protest in Monterrey, Mexico

Scores of senior citizens in Monterrey, Mexico's second most populated city, took over the offices of the Tax Administration (SAT) on December 30. At issue is the failure of the Economics Ministry to deposit resources for the "65 and more" program, leaving retirees with no checks.

"65 and more" (65 y más) is a welfare program from the federal government of 525 pesos (US\$30.51), monthly (paid in two-month installments) for impoverished seniors that have no social security pensions. The welfare program was recently instituted as a complement to "70 y más," a stipend of 500 pesos for those impoverished seniors over the age of 70. Both programs include 6.5 million seniors.

Fifty-seven percent of Mexican seniors report not being able to cover their most basic needs.

The Monterrey demonstrators invaded the SAT building in downtown Monterrey with picket signs repudiating Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto, Social Development Secretary Antonio Meade, and Economics Secretary Luis Videgaray. They

vowed to remain in the building until they receive a response from the government.

No explanation was given for the lack of funds. It now appears that the deposits for the "65 and more" program will not be made until February.

Acayucan, Mexico water workers threaten to strike

Workers at the Acayucan branch of the Veracruz State Water Commission are threatening a strike if their wages and other benefits are not paid on time this month.

Workers declared that they have been forced into this decision, when they were not paid on December 31 and had to mobilize in front of the Water Commission headquarters, demanding their pay.

Federal and state employees in Argentina carry out one-day national strike

On December 29, members of the Association of Government Employees (ATE) went on strike and mobilized in downtown Buenos Aires in defense of their jobs and living standards.

ATE General Secretary Hugo Godoy demanded that the newly installed administration of president Mauricio Macri renew the contracts of 695,000 state and provincial contingent employees, whose contracts ended December 31.

Godoy also demanded a 5,000 pesos bonus (US \$376) as compensation for lost buying power, pointing out that to raise workers' purchasing power to the 2007 level would require a 46 percent raise in 2016.

The strike and mobilization took place after the Macri government announced plans to evaluate the contracts of 64,000 temporary employees and those of permanent workers employed during the last three years of the Cristina Fernandez administration. Supposedly, those workers who are allegedly collecting a paycheck without performing any function would be sacked. Many public employees view this move as a convenient pretext to eliminate thousands of jobs. The protest strike is expected not to impact Macri's plan.

Equally undeterred, Buenos Aires Governor María Eugenia Vidal announced that workers' wages would be discounted for the strike day.

Patagonian transit workers to strike this week

Over the holidays, the Indalo bus company in the city of Neuquen sacked six drivers. Transit bus drivers in this city, capital of Neuquen province, called a strike of indefinite duration for Monday January 4. The strike was organized by workers independent of their union (UTA) leadership.

Leaders of the transit union UTA intervened, calling a Monday meeting to define “what steps to take next,” not mentioning the strike call, making it clear that the union would not approve of the strike.

Since the beginning of 2015, over 30 drivers have been sacked.

This is the second strike this year by Neuquen city bus drivers. Last March, the drivers struck for 36 hours to protest delays in their wages.

Rosario, Argentina taxi drivers announce protest strike

This Saturday, taxi drivers will carry out a 24-hour strike to protest an attack on one of their own, Marcelo Fabián Viva. Viva was shot by two assailants and is hospitalized with serious wounds.

Chicago Coca-Cola strike ends with tentative agreement

Coca-Cola workers at two Chicago-area facilities began to return to work December 30 after Teamsters Local 727 reached an agreement with management on a new three-year contract. The 319 workers involved in the 27-day strike have yet to ratify the new agreement and the union has not set a date for the vote.

The contract provides for wage increases of 3 percent in the first year and 2.5 percent in the second and third years of the contract. On a previously rejected agreement, the union claimed that wage increases would be wiped out by company demands for concessions on health care.

Under the new agreement, workers’ health care coverage will be transferred to a plan currently covering Coke management. That plan reduces the cost of premiums by \$7 a week for single coverage and more than \$40 a week for families. There was no indication of the quality of the new plan. The union has recommended the new proposal, calling it “fair”.

Ultimatum to Connecticut orchestra: Pay cut or shut down

The board governing the Hartford Symphony Orchestra has threatened to shut down the organization unless musicians accept a 30 percent cut in pay. Artistic director Stephen Collins claims it must have the concessions in order to overcome a \$1 million structural deficit.

During the 2008-2011, the capital city symphony cut its budget from \$6.5 million to \$4.8 million. Michael Pollard, violinist and member of the union’s negotiating committee, responded, “We are not the problem. ... Even if we accepted everything they are asking of us, that doesn't take care of the problem.”

The threatened shutdown of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra is preceded by the loss of the region’s ballet and opera companies.

Locked-out Ontario casino workers struck by vehicles on picket line

Since being locked out by their employer on December 15, at least three casino workers have been struck on the picket line by vehicles entering the Rideau Carleton Raceway Slots south of Ottawa, with some requiring hospitalization.

Attendants, cashiers and housekeepers are employed by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG) and are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). They have been working without a contract since May of 2014 and have not had a wage increase since 2009. They are seeking wage parity with workers in similar jobs across the province as well as protection for their pensions.

The police have still not laid charges in any of at least three reported incidents. A union spokesman has said that he is confident that charges will be laid against the drivers, as they are warranted.



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