

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 March 2016

Mexican mineworkers strike over firings, contract violations

Some 3,500 mineworkers in the Mexican port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán struck March 4 to protest the policies of steel processing firm ArcelorMittal. The striking mineworkers, members of section 271 of the SNTMMSSRM national mine and metal workers union, gathered at noon at the firm's port facility and at other affiliates and hung the traditional red and black flags that indicate industrial action.

The striking workers demanded the reinstatement of over 300 workers who were fired by the company at its Coquizadora facility under the pretext of economic problems due to slackening of international demand for steel products. The union asserts that the Collective Work Contract, signed in August 2015, obliges the company to relocate the workers.

Union officials took pains to label the walkout as a "strike in fact" (huelga de hechos) because they fear that the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board, which "archived" the union's declaration one hour before the strike began, would label the action as illegal.

SNTMMSSRM sent a letter to president Enrique Peña Nieto and Labor and Social Security Secretary Alfonso Navarrete Prida asking them to respect labor rights since "the fact that the Board has archived the strike expedient raises the danger that it will be declared null and then dislodging can proceed."

Mexican university workers strike over firings, unpaid raise

The Autonomous University of Querétaro Workers and Employees Syndicate (STEUAQ) began a strike at noon March 4 to protest the firings of 40 employees. The strike was also called because the governor of the state of Querétaro, Francisco Domínguez Servián, had not fulfilled a promise to increase the university budget by 10 percent. The strike had originally been set for March 1, but STEUAQ delayed the action while it negotiated without result with the rectory.

In previous negotiations, STEUAQ had demanded a 10 percent wage hike, but eventually settled for 3.1 percent, in line with the governor's proposed budget increase for the university. Domínguez Servián then broke that promise.

STEUAQ president Laura Leyva complained that UAQ workers were "trampled on" and "devalued" by the rector, and that "it's not just for right now; this problem has been during the three years of this administration." She also denounced the firings, which included two secretaries, a manager and a night watchman, and the rectory's explanation that there were not enough resources to retain them.

The rectory has hired new employees without consulting the union

as well, a violation of the contract.

Dominican doctors announce three-day strike over wage and other demands

On March 4, the Panasalud federation of doctors and other health professionals who work in public hospitals and clinics in the Dominican Republic announced its intention to hold a 72-hour strike beginning March 8. Emergency services and attention to patients in critical condition will continue.

Among the demands are the allotment of five percent of gross domestic product to the health sector, a 60 percent pay increase, decent pensions and medical benefits, and the hiring of more personnel.

A Panasalud spokesperson told reporters that the strike is necessary because President Danilo Medina refused to talk with the health workers after they held a protest march the week before. She said that his claim to be willing to engage in dialogue is a rhetorical device to gain time and "deactivate the process of struggle."

A spokesman for the National Police warned, "They should have recourse to their rights respecting the form in which it is granted, that is in a peaceful manner, and without uniting with those who do not want to participate."

Trinidadian construction workers protest nonpayment of wages

Workers for Brazilian construction firm OAS Construtora held protests in front of the company's headquarters in Golconda in southern Trinidad. These followed a February 26 protest outside the Works and Transport Ministry's London Street, Port-of-Spain office.

OAS Construtora was contracted to work on an extension of the Solomon Hochoy Highway, T&T's major north-south highway. Nearly 1,000 workers have been affected by the company's failure to pay them, some arrears going back to October 2015. Others have complained of being shorted and of not receiving promotions. Local contractors have also complained of being stiffed.

OAS has promised workers several times that they would resolve the matter, but workers have found that when they take their pay slips to the bank, there is no money in their accounts. The workers have filed a court action to obtain the money.

On March 3, riot police were called to the headquarters after a local contractor, accompanied by a Marshal of the Court, brought a court order and began to seize some heavy equipment. About 25 protesting

workers formed a human chain in front of the gates, and others placed old tires and pieces of wood on the driveway. The workers eventually decided to leave the driveway and the police cleared the entrance.

Panamanian banana workers hold short strike to demand dialogue

Some 4,000 fieldworkers for the Bocas Fruit Company in Changuinola, in Panama's northern Bocas del Toro province, refused to work from 6 to 8 am March 4. Some of the workers struck for two hours more.

The strike was called by the Bocas del Toro Banana Workers Syndicate, SITRAIBANA, to pressure the proprietor to sit down to dialogue with the workers over violations of the contract, including the raise of the minimum wage and pay days.

SITRAIBANA said that they would carry out new measures if necessary.

Colombian coal mine workers vote to strike over wages and benefits

Following 40 days of fruitless negotiations, workers at the Colombian El Cerrejón coal mine voted by over 98 percent March 3 to strike to press their wage and benefit demands. Following the vote, the workers' union, Sintracarbón, announced that it would give the company ten more days to engage in bargaining, after which "we will decide the start date," declared union president Jairo Quiroz.

El Cerrejón, located in northeastern Colombia not far from the Venezuela border, is a huge open pit mine complex that extracted 32 million tons of coal last year, accounting for nearly 39 percent of the nation's coal production. It is operated jointly by Australia-based BHP Billiton Ltd, London- and Johannesburg-based Anglo American plc, and Swiss-based Glencore Xstrata.

In the negotiations, Sintracarbón reps have proposed a wage rise of 10.1 percent, improvements in education, health and housing as well as job security guarantees. The company, citing the slowdown in demand for raw materials, has offered 6.77 percent and a one-time bonus of US\$1,000 for each employee. Sintracarbón "remains willing to dialogue with the enterprise in order to seek an accord that avoids paralysis," reported *noticiasrcn.com* March 4.

Sintracarbón represents about 4,200 out of 10,000 workers at the mine, with an equivalent number of contract laborers and the rest represented by Sintracerejón, a separate union that has been negotiating a "direct settlement" with management. The last strike at El Cerrejón was a 32-day walkout in 2013.

Iowa workers strike over wages and benefits

Over 50 workers at the West Rock factory in Sioux City, Iowa went on strike March 3 against management demands for pension and

health care concessions. The members of the International Association of Machinists are also seeking higher wages and oppose an attempt by Web Rock to insert contract language that will allow them to unilaterally impose new conditions without consulting the union.

West Rock manufactures corrugated packaging and box materials for Tyson Foods and other companies in the Sioux City area.

Kentucky workers engage in unfair labor practices strike

Members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 912 went on strike February 27 alleging unfair labor practices against Ingersoll-Rand-owned Trane plant in Lexington, Kentucky. The UAW has not released information about the nature of the strike.

Ingersoll-Rand indicated it hopes for a resolution but had "taken measures" to continue production "to ensure business continuity at the facility."

Toronto Inside Workers' Union Officials Accept Concessions

Officials for Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 79, representing some 23,000 inside municipal workers at the city of Toronto agreed last week to a tentative contract that concedes significant job security protections. The four-year deal also weakens the health benefits plan and offers paltry wage rises below the rate of inflation. Workers will vote on the deal this week.

The inside municipal workers began a work-to-rule two weeks ago. Earlier, 5,400 outside municipal workers accepted a contract endorsed by their own CUPE local officials that provided for similar concessions. Despite strong strike votes from the membership, over the course of the two disputes, union officials from both locals made it clear to city officials that they would be reluctant to call their memberships out on strike.

Halifax Chronicle Herald Strikers Rally

Sixty-one striking newspaper employees were joined by supporters last week at a Halifax rally to mark the sixth week on the picket lines. In a series of unprecedented demands, management has sought to include contract language that would permit it to outsource the vast majority of the work in the bargaining unit.

Typographical Union officials have already offered the company significant concessions on wages and benefits but balked at terms that could see the complete demise of unionized labour at the newspaper.



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