

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 June 2016

Protests by Mexican health workers

Doctors, nurses and other health sector workers held protests in cities throughout Mexico on June 22 to protest possible passage of a set of reforms that would negatively impact their job security, working conditions and ability to serve patients. The protesters also demanded a range of changes to the dire state of the health care system.

Many major cities, including Mexico City, Xalapa, Veracruz, Chilpancingo, Guadalajara, Mexicali and Cancún, saw demonstrations and marches. They protested the lack of supplies and medicine, poor working conditions and crumbling infrastructure, which have been constant problems for years. Other issues include harassment, unjustified firings, understaffing and criminalization of medical workers who cannot give adequate care or who protest against the deteriorating state of the health care system.

Privatization, which would further erode salaries, labor rights and provision of services, is another concern of the health workers. Yet another is the incursion of organized crime. At a protest in Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz, one doctor told *La Jornada*, “We are subject to violence, kidnapping, even assassination, which make many interns not want to do their service in distant communities... It isn’t possible that we let the federal authorities do nothing to protect us.”

The mobilizations were called by #YoSoyMédico17, a movement for health care reforms. It is demanding a meeting with President Enrique Peña Nieto—they refuse to meet with the Secretary of Health, José Narro—as well as with the president of the Senate and the Health Commission.

Mexican teachers strike against retirement policy changes

Teachers at three campuses of the Querétaro State Distinguished Centennial Normal School (CBENEQ) in central Mexico went on strike June 21 to protest changes in the state government’s retirement plan. The state government is trying to “harmonize” teachers’ retirement with the labor “reforms” introduced by the Peña Nieto administration.

The Workers in Service to the Powers of the State Law requires 30 years of service or 60 years of age to qualify for retirement. Previously teachers could retire after 28 years with no age requirement. Currently, 15 teachers are eligible for retirement under the former arrangement, and as of March 2017, 18 more will be, but would be forced to work two more years under the new set-up.

The state government has offered a one-time 15 percent bonus for those teachers who remain two more years, an offer that can be scrapped in the future. The state Conciliation and Arbitration Board

had given the parties 72 hours to reach an agreement, which failed to materialize. About 185 teachers are taking part in the walkout.

48-hour strike and protests against closure of Bolivian textile plant

A 48-hour strike and marches were held on June 23 and 24 in La Paz and other cities across Bolivia to protest the closure of the state textile firm Enatex and the layoffs of 850 workers. The mobilization was called by the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) federation.

Enatex, established in 2012, was shuttered in mid-May by the government, which claimed that it did not make enough of a return on investment to justify its continued operation. The workers were not informed beforehand, and when they showed up for work one day and found out that they had been laid off, they held a spontaneous protest. The COB is demanding that the plant be reopened and that the workers be reinstated.

The government of Evo Morales, declaring the strike “illegal” and “fictitious,” sent police to the La Paz protest, where they used teargas on protesters. Some protesters reacted by throwing rocks. Six people—5 protesters and one police officer—were injured and 23 demonstrators were arrested.

The strike and protest followed a June 20 protest in Las Paz, in which police teargassed teachers and health workers who demonstrated and blocked some highways in opposition to the closure. The COB called for a 72-hour protest this week.

Brazilian foreign affairs workers strike against pay cuts

Employees of Brazil’s Foreign Affairs Ministry went on strike June 24 to protest against a 40 percent cut in their end-of-year bonus as well as the elimination of the Exterior Representation Compensation for those who work outside the country.

A ministry communiqué, issued late on June 23, blamed “severe budget restrictions” for the cuts and said that it had requested additional credits of 580 million reales (US\$173 million) from the National Treasury.

The workers’ union, Sintamaraty, and the Planning Ministry, which administers the foreign offices’ salaries, have entered negotiations.

Chilean college workers strike

Workers at the Father Alberto Hurtado Multipurpose College in Chillán, in central Chile's Ñuble province, began an indefinite strike June 22. The 87 striking workers, who are both teachers and staff, took the action to demand that the administration respect previously signed agreements that it is attempting to eliminate with a new contract.

Among their union's demands, they want to maintain the prior agreement, improve it in several areas, and "not eliminate some benefits that we have acquired, such as the seniority bonus, a benefit that we have had for six years that is given out every year. This recognizes the time that we have spent working and the effort that we dedicate to this institution," said union head Humberto Gallardo.

The workers object to the planned replacement of the bonus with an evaluation system "which is something that should not be done in the educational environment," said Gallardo. He called the strike "the consequence of the intransigence that the employer has had with us," referring to the administration's refusal to meet with them.

The workers held a vigil on June 23 across from the bishop's headquarters and marched through Chillán to dramatize their demands on the 24th.

New York Farm Bureau defends law that bars farmworkers from unionizing

A new round of efforts to convince the New York state legislature to reverse itself and grant bargaining rights to the state's 60,000 farm laborers brought a protest from the New York Farm Bureau. "If we can't count on our state leaders to do the right thing in this case, we are prepared to stand up for our members in court to protect their rights," Farm Bureau president Dean Norton declared.

The New York Civil Liberties Union has filed a lawsuit over the ban on bargaining rights for the highly-exploited farmworkers. Erin Beth Harrist attacked that denial of rights to farmworkers, saying, "We reject the Farm Bureau's continued assertions that this racist, holdover policy from Jim Crow has any place in New York today."

The law is based on the interpretation of a 1938 exemption and previous rulings. Farmworker Crispin Hernandez told the media, "They treat us like slaves and worse than the cows. There are so many injustices where we work."

The legislature's refusal to alter the anti-worker law allowed New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to assume a fake posture as a defender of farmworkers' rights and his attorney general says it will not defend the law. Farmers fear that a \$15 an hour minimum wage and bargaining rights that will permit farmworkers to strike at harvest time could ruin the state's agriculture as the class struggle intensifies between farmers and farmworkers.

Southern Ontario libraries on strike

All 14 branches of the Essex County Library outside of Windsor, Ontario are on strike this week after a Saturday deadline passed without a deal in place and with no talks scheduled. The 58 striking workers, which include librarians and other staff, are represented by

the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), who have been working without a contract since the end of March. According to union negotiators, the library is being inflexible on what the union is calling a "phantom" issue, demanding clawbacks for unused sick days and for short-term disability.

Mediated talks broke down last week and a spokesman for the county said there are plans in place to keep libraries operating during the strike using management staff.

Postal workers face lockout or strike

50,000 postal workers across the country could be locked out or on strike by the end of the week if ongoing negotiations don't produce a new contract before that time.

July 2 marks the end of a government led conciliation process that began in April with negotiators for the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) indicating that they will not strike but saying that they are nevertheless expecting to be locked out if a deal isn't reached. Negotiations have been stalled by employer demands for concessions on a range of issues covering jobs, benefits and pensions. Of particular concern for the union is the discrepancy in wages between urban and rural postal carriers with the latter, who are predominantly female immigrant workers, being paid considerably less.

Countering union accusations that they are not bargaining in good faith, negotiators for the crown corporation say that they are actively seeking a settlement to avoid a work disruption although details of negotiations are not being made public.



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