

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 August 2016

Mexican university professors strike to demand higher pay, reclassifications

Professors at the Zacatecas Polytechnic University (UPZ) in Fresnillo, Zacatecas, Mexico walked off the job on August 10. The 65 educators, members of the UPZ Academic and Administrative Syndicate (SAAUPZ), struck after a failed meeting with the rector that morning.

SAAUPZ has two main demands. The union is calling for a salary raise of 15 percent; the rector has offered 3.7 percent. The union is also demanding the reclassification of professors with higher levels of scholarship. Some 65 percent of professors have Masters or Doctoral degrees, yet they are paid the same as their colleagues.

Costa Rican taxi drivers protest Uber, clash with police

Thousands of taxi drivers in Costa Rica held protests against the Uber ride service August 9. The cabbies denounced the service as unfair competition, since Uber drivers are not subject to the fees, insurances, licenses and other requirements that taxis are. Uber also forces its drivers—who it pretends are independent contractors—to charge much lower fares than taxis.

Taxi drivers attempted to slow or stop traffic along major highways, especially arteries to and from the capital San Jose. One tactic, known as “tortuguismo” (turtleism) involves a row of taxis driving slowly in all lanes. In other cases, drivers parked their vehicles to block major highway routes.

The government had planned for the actions in advance. Private shuttles were employed to take tourists to airports hours before their flights. Three thousand police were deployed to break up the blockades. They arrested around 80 drivers, fined about 120, and confiscated at least 33 cabs. Confrontations between cops and cabbies resulted in some injuries on both sides.

By noon, the protests had petered out, with National Taxi Drivers Forum head Gilberth Ureña saying that the group had reached an agreement with the Public Services Regulatory Authority to end the protests and attend a meeting August 16.

Panamanian teachers end strike after 35 days

Teachers at Panama's Professional and Technical Institute of Veraguas (IPTV) decided on August 13 to end their 35-day strike and return to their classrooms on August 15. Some 2,000 teachers had walked off the job five weeks before to protest the failure of the Ministry of Education (Meduca) to complete construction of a new building for the college. Meduca reneged on its promise to complete the construction earlier.

The decision to return to their classrooms was taken at a meeting of the Family Parents Assembly after the Ministry of Education (Meduca) confirmed that it had signed an addendum for extension of time to restart construction of the new building. The project has already taken over two-and-a-half years.

“They promised us that later in the first week of September the work should be renewed and we will be vigilant so that it will be,” Assembly president Demetrio Muñoz told *El Siglo*.

Argentina: Teachers, judicial workers, medical and health care workers strike to reopen parity talks

Workers in the education, judicial and health care sectors in the Argentine provinces of Buenos Aires, Chubut, Entre Ríos and Santa Cruz struck and held protests August 11. The walkout was called by a number of union groupings—known as the Union Front—that includes the SUTEBA, CEB, and FEB public school teachers' federations and the SADOP private school union. Sections of the ATE state workers federation, which had called for a national strike, also participated.

The teachers' unions claimed adhesion of over 90 percent by public school teachers and 37 percent by the private education sector. The principal demand was the reopening of parity talks to readjust salaries that have been eroded by inflation, public service fee increases and devaluation of the peso. Other demands included improvements for retired workers, payments of overdue—in some cases up to five months—salaries and budget increases for infrastructure and campus cafeterias.

The strike and protests followed the breakdown of talks earlier in the week between the Union Front and the Buenos Aires provincial government headed by María Eugenia Vidal, an ally of national president Mauricio Macri. Government spokespersons claimed that the strike was “irrational” and that the government's latest raise had surpassed the nation's inflation rate, which in fact, is consistently underestimated.

Renewed protests against planned closure of Guyanese sugar factory

August 9 saw the renewal of protests against the planned shutdown of the West Bank Demerara Sugar Estate, a sugar processing facility in Wales, Guyana. The workers and their supporters had first protested the projected shuttering of the plant in January by the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) following the government's announcement that continued operation was economically unfeasible.

The most recent protest, which was organized by the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), took place in front of the Ministry of the Presidency in Georgetown. Workers remain skeptical of the government's claims that it will minimize the impact of the closure through transfers of workers to another facility twenty miles away, and

that it is conducting feasibility studies in an attempt to diversify the local economy.

GAWU also claimed that cane farmers in the area would be unable to afford the added transportation costs for getting their crops to the more distant factory. The government says that it will facilitate the transport of cane through improved roads.

In a statement, the GAWU said that it "wishes to inform the public that friends of the workers have taken an initiative to express solidarity through a petition on the internet and urge the supportive public to sign same."

Guyana sugar workers protest oppressive conditions

Hundreds of workers at the East Coast Demerara sugar estates of Enmore and La Bonne Intention (LBI) took to the streets to protest their working conditions and demand that the government intervene to rectify them. Shouting, "Enough is enough!" and displaying placards, the workers marched and denounced the merging of the two estates, making full-time work harder to get.

Whereas workers previously earned about 2,100 Guyanese dollars (GYD), or US\$10.24, per day, the current amount is closer to GYD700 (US\$3.41), one worker told the court. No allowances are made for former LBI workers who now have to travel greater distances to get to Enmore. "On the other hand, the field workers of Enmore Estate are objecting to the manner in which their counterparts at LBI are being pushed over to their Estate," reported the *Times*.

Enmore Estate management has refused to address the issues, claiming that GuySuCo has already made its decision. The GAWU is asking Guyana's President David Granger and Minister of Agriculture Noel Holder to resolve the issues.

Jamaican farmworkers strike, protest delays in wage negotiations

Over 200 workers at JP Tropical Foods in St. Mary, Jamaica stopped work August 10 to protest delays in wage negotiations between management and the three unions—the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union, the National Workers Union, and the University and Allied Workers Union—that represent them.

The parties have been in talks since June, when the unions submitted their proposals for the 2016-17 contract period. With back-to-school expenses looming, workers grew frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations—especially since management had slotted time for a company performance meeting while saying nothing about the wage talks—and decided to strike. After a meeting with the company CEO, who promised to resume talks on August 15, the workers agreed to return to work the next day.

Owners of Massachusetts hospital spent \$24 million to defeat nurses' struggle

The corporate owners of Brigham and Women's Hospital revealed August 12 that it spent \$24 million in preparations to take on the hospital's 3,300 nurses in this summer's contract battle. Members of the

Massachusetts Nurses Association had scheduled a one-day strike on June 27 before finally their union capitulated on the eve of the action.

The \$24 million figure was included in a report issued by Partners HealthCare, which owns Brigham and Women's Hospital and is Massachusetts' largest health care system. In preparations for the canceled one-day strike, the company spent \$8 million on temporary workers and \$16 million in costs related to transferring hundreds of patients to other facilities and canceled medical procedures and appointments.

Peter Markell, the chief financial officer, shrugged at the costs saying, "No one likes to be out \$24 million, but frankly, at the end of the day, it was the cost of doing business." Currently, Partners HealthCare suffered an overall operating loss of \$33 million in the quarter ending June 30, compared to a gain of \$30 million during the same quarter last year. But the company's revenues for the quarter grew by 7 percent to nearly \$3.2 billion and the company estimates that revenues for the current fiscal year will reach \$12 billion, far outstripping its competitors.

Airport catering workers set to strike in Vancouver

Over 400 workers employed by Gate Gourmet and Vancouver International Airport are set to walk off the job after giving their union, UNITE Here, a strong mandate last week for job action up to and including a strike.

Workers at the inflight catering company that includes drivers and production staff, accepted a three-year wage freeze in their last contract and are fighting for wage gains to offset those concessions now that the airline industry is emerging from a slump. The union reports that despite the economic health of the company they are only offering a 1 percent wage increase. The company has also instituted an overtime ban which has led to understaffing and increased pressure on workers who often work up to 10 days in a row without overtime pay.

Both sides reportedly remain far apart on a new contract despite ongoing mediation. Their last contract expired at the end of July.

Alt magazine facing labor strife

The popular pseudo-left *Now* magazine could see its 53 unionized workers on strike or lockout in the coming days after management issued a no-board report last week, starting a 17-day countdown.

With negotiations ongoing since last year, the company is reportedly attempting to revisit settled items in a new contract while asking for additional concessions. Conciliation in July between the company and Unifor, which represents workers, produced a settlement accepted by the union but which the employer rejected and then refused a union request for binding arbitration.

The company cites falling ad revenue in a volatile industry, and a recent ban on ads for sexual services, for putting the viability of the publication and the jobs of its workers in jeopardy. The magazine, which is steeped in identity politics, nevertheless claims to stand for social justice and democratic rights.

Youth services workers strike in Manitoba

On August 2, Crisis Stabilization workers for Macdonald Youth Services (MYS) in Winnipeg, Manitoba went on strike after receiving no reply from their employer or the government after being without a contract for over 2 years.

The workers are represented by the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU) who say that after getting no answer to repeated phone calls or to a formal request made to the government, they had no choice but to call a strike. They are seeking a 2 percent wage increase in a new contract, citing management wage increases of up to 9 percent of the last 2 years.

Workers at MYS deal with vulnerable, mostly aboriginal youth at the government funded agency, making over 1,500 visits to help families and youth in crisis.



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