Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 October 2016

48-hour strike by Chilean public service workers over raise, job security

Following the failure to come to agreement on a pay raise, job security and other demands, members of Chile's Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF) struck for two days beginning October 20. At meetings with government representatives October 18, ANEF had proposed a 7 percent raise, which the government countered with a 3 percent proposal.

Another ANEF demand was an end to job insecurity caused by the use of contract labor, which the government did not address.

About 1,000 protesting workers gathered on October 21 at the Plaza de las Armas in La Serena, the capital of the northern Coquimbo region. ANEF asserted that the strike had a 90 percent rate of participation, while the government claimed that it was less than one-third.

The government suspended negotiations, while ANEF said that it would consider changing the timeframe of the strike to indefinite.

Salvadoran hospital workers strike over wages

Workers at the Zacalmi Hospital near San Salvador declared themselves on strike October 19 to press their demand for an 8 percent raise for 2017. At the same time, protests have been held nationwide because "the health minister is violating the right to the wage scale and we cannot permit that," according to Fernando Rivas, a hospital union official.

Rivas was referring to the 1994 Wage Scale Law for health workers that established that wages would rise by 8 percent every year. More than 28,000 workers are affected by the law.

Workers for at least 12 hospitals and 50 clinics have reduced services to emergency room, medication dispensing and hospitalization. Striking workers have denounced the use of the police to intimidate workers and have requested an investigation of "shock groups" (grupos de choque) connected to the FMLN government.

Belizean teachers strike for 11 days over wages, working conditions

Members of the Belize National Teachers' Union (BNTU) returned to work October 19, bringing to an end a strike begun October 8 over an eight-point list of demands.

Chief among the demands was the immediate payment of a 3 percent raise, which Prime Minister Dean Barrow had announced would be deferred until 2017. The BNTU, which called protests in September and earlier in October over that measure, claimed that most of the eight-point agenda had been achieved. However, BNTU President Luke Palacio told reporters that the actual arrangement was for 5 percent interest on the 3 percent, which will still be deferred.

One demand that has been agreed upon is the naming of a "good governance" committee, though "the composition of the committee does not reflect what the BNTU had been requesting," admitted Palacio, but more in line with what Barrow wanted.

On the subject of docking pay of striking teachers at government and government-aided schools, Palacio's response was that the government cannot instruct management to deduct for strike action, and "[o]ur teachers are prepared to make up the time. We are appealing to those managers; kindly give the teachers their salaries at the end of the month because they were not doing anything illegal."

Mexican labor arbitration board workers strike over labor reforms

About 300 workers at the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JFCA) in Mexico City's Azcapotzalco municipality went on strike October 20. The striking workers held a demonstration in front of the JFCA building to protest recent labor law reforms being considered in the Congress that would convert the board to a court, threatening to destroy the jobs of 5,000 JFCA workers nationally.

A JFCA employee representative, Beatriz González, told reporters, "We say a total 'no' to the labor reform because our source of work…is going to be closed; what we are asking is that

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they turn to us to see why there is no proposal to relocate the people who work in the boards." She added that the employees had held talks with JFCA President Jorge Zorrilla, but "he only tells us that we are going to be liquidated and nothing more."

The workers whose jobs are threatened include administrative personnel, legal and medical experts, clerks and actuaries. Labor Secretary Alfonso Navarrete Prida insisted that federal authorities would engage in "absolute dialog" with the JFCA workers and that "labor rights will be absolutely respected and unscathed."

The next day the JFCA workers' representatives signed an agreement to return to work October 24 after a meeting with various government officials. González said that a series of meetings would commence this week to review the development of the legislation. "We arrived at agreements, but if they don't carry them out we don't rule out the possibility that we'll renew a labor stoppage like Thursday's."

More than 250 warehouse workers strike US foods in Denver

In the most recent strike at foodservice company US Foods, workers set up picket lines at its Denver facilities on October 24. More than 250 workers are involved in the strike action over unfair labor practices.

Steve Vairma, Teamsters Local 455 secretary-treasurer, who organizes the workers, said of the nation's second-largest foodservice company, "US Foods' pattern of anti-worker, anti-union behavior threatens not only its hardworking employees, but also the restaurants, schools, hospitals and state agencies that depend on our members for reliable, dependable service each and every day," adding, "We will not allow this company to enrich its private equity owners and stakeholders by abusing the rights of its workforce."

US Foods was purchased by private equity firms KKR and CD&R nine years ago and ever since has been systematically intimidating and harassing its employees, provoking protests and job actions from Southern California to New York. The company has 27 facilities nationwide and employs 25,000 workers.

Vancouver area bus drivers set to strike

Drivers, mechanics and service workers employed by Blue Bus Service in West Vancouver could be on strike this week after mediated talks collapsed a week ago and their union launched a limited job action that included an overtime ban which has already meant the cancellation of service on some routes.

The 149 workers are represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and have been without a contract since March of this year. Reports indicate that the two sides are far apart on a number of issues in a new contract including working conditions and benefits.

Blue Bus provides public transit for the District of West Vancouver with links to a number of routes connecting to ferry services along the B.C. coastline.

Northern Ontario city workers to strike

Some 700 inside and outside municipal employees in the City of Thunder Bay on the northern shore of Lake Superior could be on strike as early as November 1 after their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), requested a no-board report which sets the deadline for a work stoppage.

Workers affected include staff from at least 25 different departments who have been working without a contract for nearly two years. Although negotiations have been ongoing for over a year, mediated talks are not scheduled to begin until next week.

Union negotiators have said that the move to a no-board report was made in order to pressure the city for a deal and that they are particularly concerned over demands to revise workers' benefits. Without offering any specifics, city managers have indicated that backup plans are in place in the event of a strike.

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