

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 December 2016

Mexican health workers strike over unpaid wages, bonus, lack of supplies

Some 8,000 workers, among them doctors and nurses, in the public health sector in the Mexican state of Baja California struck December 14. The striking workers, members of the Health Syndicate Section 3, list among their demands the payment of their last two bimonthly wages as well as the end-of-year bonus and food vouchers.

About 300 workers in the border town of Tecate picketed the hospital. Another 600 held protests in the esplanade of the Mexicali General Hospital, while protests were held at health centers and maternity wards. Emergency services were not discontinued.

The union has made appeals to the finance secretary and state governor, who have not responded.

The workers have other demands and complaints. Shortages of supplies, medicines and other resources are chronic and they say that they cannot provide adequate service to their clients with the poor state of the equipment. A union official complained that the hospitals were not originally intended to be “a freezer, a mortuary, an amphitheater for keeping bodies,” yet they were being used for such purposes while surgeries had to be performed in surgical anterooms and sometimes in hallways.

Honduran civil registry workers hold one-day strike over unpaid bonus

National Persons Registry (RNP) central office workers in Tegucigalpa, Honduras went on strike on December 16 over a number of demands including wages. About 1,500 employees walked out.

The workers are demanding the retroactive payment of a bonus that the government has already given to other public employees. The bonus would cover the months of October through December. They are also calling for the payment of the end-of-year bonus (*aguinaldo*) that they should have gotten in mid-December.

Striking RNP workers talked to customers to explain the strike and recommended that they go to another municipality to carry on their business. They have asked authorities of the Finance Secretariat and the president to intervene.

Nicaraguan textile workers sentenced to prison for engaging in “illegal” strike

Eight Nicaraguan workers for Korean-owned Technotex textile business were sentenced to a year in prison December 16 for their participation in a strike last June. A judge for the municipality of Tipitapa, which is located between lake Nicaragua and Lake Managua, handed down the sentence.

The judge’s ruling was in accord with the Public Ministry, which accused the workers of obstructing police officers who were breaking up the strike. About 3,000 workers had demonstrated at the factory to demand better conditions and the rehiring of union activists who had been fired.

They also had asked for access to potable water and the adjustment of production goals to coincide with the capacity of each worker.

The day after the walkout, the Labor Ministry had declared the strike illegal, claiming that the workers had not exhausted internal means of negotiation and ordered them back to work.

Haitian hospital workers strike to demand health ministry deliver on promises

Workers in 19 Haitian public hospitals went on strike last week to demand that the Ministry of Health respect the promises it made to them after they ended a strike August 30. They had begun the industrial action in March to demand not only improved wages and conditions, but the provision of medicine, supplies and equipment.

The current walkout, called by the National Federation of Health Workers (FENATRAS), was at first limited to support staff, but in some locations, particularly the Hospital of the State University of Haiti in Port-au-Prince, doctors, residents and others joined the strike.

The Minister of Health had promised FENATRAS back in August that it would deliver on its promises, but in early December the minister, Daphnée Benoit Delsoin, announced that the wage raise was impossible.

Doctors have stopped admitting new patients, only treating those already in hospital. They say that they will join the strike if the Health Ministry does not come up with an agreement.

Trinidadian highway workers protest for unpaid wages

About 200 former workers on an uncompleted highway project in Trinidad held a protest demonstration in front of the Ministry of Works and Transport in Port-of-Spain December 16. The workers, members of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU), demanded to be paid for the work they had done for an extension from Pt. Fortin to

San Fernando.

The contractor, OAS Construtora, aborted the project when its parent company, Grupos OAS of Brazil, filed for bankruptcy in 2015. Over 800 workers were retrenched without payment or severance pay. Since then, the National Infrastructure Development Company has recovered TT\$670 million (US\$100 million) in letters of credit and bonds from banks that provided guarantees for OAS.

The protest followed a meeting between OWTU President Ancel Roget and the Works and Transport Minister. Roget said that over TT\$23 million (US\$3.4 million) are owed to the retrenched workers, warning that if every single worker was not paid, "All hell will break loose." Some workers have been waiting over four years to get paid.

Strike by Chilean bank employees over raise, benefits

Employees of the ServiEstado bank system in the Chilean province of Bio Bio, walked off the job on December 15 to press their demands. They rejected management's 1 percent monthly wage hike offer, equivalent to 8,500 pesos, or barely US\$12.62.

Since the workers have to follow demanding norms of protocol, that is sufficient to demand a higher raise and better conditions, according to their union delegate, Felipe Gutiérrez. The bank is open Monday through Saturday, and the striking workers are demanding overtime pay.

New Jersey teachers protest deadlocked contract talks

Some 1,600 teachers from Toms River, New Jersey, have been maintaining an informational picket at the end of school hours since December 12 to protest dead-end negotiations that have left them without a contract for the last six months. Toms River teachers, who like all New Jersey teachers, are barred from striking, have been packing school board meetings wearing t-shirts to show their displeasure with events.

The school board claims it is offering wage increases of 3.4 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent over three years. But these wages are constantly being undermined by Chapter 78, a pension law put through in 2011 by the state legislature that requires public sector employees to pay a portion of their health care benefits. "We would just like to make a nickel more than we did four years ago, that would be just," Andrea Vahey, a math teacher, told the Asbury Park Press.

The Toms River Education Association, which represents teachers, have been using Chapter 78 as an excuse to avoid a clash with the school board and the Democratic Party. Instead, they have been making Governor Chris Christie a target. Erich Brunner, a union representative, said, "We're not fighting with the school board. We're not fighting with the district. We're not fighting with the town.

Alberta seniors' care workers locked out

Thirty workers employed by Ontario based senior care provider Points West Living (PWL) in Cold Lake, Alberta are on strike after being locked out last week and after rejecting recommendations from a provincial government board.

The workers are represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), who are negotiating for improvements in a number of areas but particularly around understaffing, scheduling and training. Union negotiators say that while a small wage offer is on the table, PWL has refused to address the main issues for workers.

Workers voted to reject a number of recommendations by the government appointed Disputes Inquiry Board (DIB), which was the latest attempt at mediating the dispute. The union cites PWL use of scab labor in the course of negotiations as one reason for workers rejecting the mediation process.

Montreal hotel workers locked out

Over 100 workers employed by the Hôtel des Gouverneurs in downtown Montreal, Quebec, were locked out last week after negotiations that began last summer collapsed between the hotel and the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) representing workers.

According to CSN negotiators the workers are fighting for improvements in wages and in holiday and severance pay. Last summer these workers took part in a series of three-day strikes by hotel workers across the province, but despite setting strike deadlines were not called out on strike by their union.

Alberta industrial service workers locked out

Workers employed by CEDA Industrial services in Fort McMurray, Alberta were locked out on December 11 after they delivered a unanimous strike vote to their union, the Teamsters, in their bid for a first contract.

The 15 mechanics have been fighting for a contract for over a year after joining the Teamsters in 2015 but negotiators say that negotiations had stalled over CEDA's insistence on contracting out some jobs at their discretion. A union spokesman in fact stated that they were quite willing to accept wage concessions and weren't even asking for a wage increase.

In the current situation, however, union negotiators point out that even if the company lifts the lockout the workers would still be on strike.



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