

Workers Struggles: the Americas

7 February 2017

One-day strike by Mexican high school staff over unpaid wages, evaluation policy

Teachers, administrative and support staff at General High School 36, Chula Vista, in Baja California Sur, Mexico refused to work on February 2. A union steward stated that the stoppage was a reaction to numerous problems regarding unpaid wages for hours worked.

According to biology professor and union steward Pedro Mendoza Hernández, one reason for the irregularities is that some employees are paid by the hour and others by the workday. The affected workers appealed to their department chief and their union's secretary in October, but the problems persist. Likewise, the Public Education Secretariat has not responded to their petitions.

An added issue for the teachers is the evaluation tests that were enacted as part of the labor reform law. In accordance with the General Law of Professional Service, two Chula Vista teachers were classified respectively as "outstanding" and "sufficient" through their evaluations, but they have not received any promotion benefits. The teachers do not oppose the evaluations, which have been the object of scores of nationwide protests. However, they say they are discouraged from taking the tests if they don't result in promised promotions and pay raises.

Union officials planned to meet with the administration February 7.

Mexican sugar factory retirees protest for payment of pensions, workers demand overdue benefits

Dozens of retired workers for the Calipan sugar factory in Calipan, Puebla, Mexico protested in front of the plant on February 2. Some of the protesters said that they are tired of waiting, in some cases up to seven years, to receive their pensions, and getting nothing but promises from the company. They have asked for intervention on the part of the authorities.

It turns out that the retirees are not the only ones with a grievance against the firm. The workers' union says that the company has not contributed to savings, insurance and the end-of-year bonus fund for several months.

A meeting at the Conciliation and Arbitration Board has been scheduled for February 8. The union has notified the recently elected governor, José Antonio Gali Fayad of the right-wing National Action Party as well. The union said it would strike February 10 if the issues are not resolved.

Mexican university workers set to strike over unpaid bonuses

Professors and administrative staff at the Bachelor Degree College of Zacatecas, Mexico are set to strike February 16 if they do not receive overdue payments of bonuses and benefits by then. Their union, Supdacobaez, stated February 3 that the college has not paid the second half of the end-of-year bonus, amounting to over 14 million pesos (US\$684,500), covering the last 15 days of December, for 1,350 workers.

In addition, a "productivity stimulus" bonus for administrative workers has not been deposited for the last three fortnights, according to union sources, adding another 2.5 million pesos (US\$122,700) to outstanding money owed. Since workers cannot withdraw the funds, the union is threatening to file a lawsuit for illegal retention of salaries.

Supdacobaez says that it has notified the state governor, who promised to liquidate the debt, but has not so far. Classes will continue normally until the strike deadline.

Puerto Rican public-sector unions call for general strike against labor laws

A number of Puerto Rican public-sector unions are calling for a general strike and mass protests on February 9 against new labor laws passed to offload the island's fiscal crisis onto the backs of workers. The unions, including the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority's Authentic Independent Union, the Irrigation & Electrical Workers Union, the General Workers Union and the Teachers Association, issued the call through social media.

The Labor Transformation and Flexibility Act, recently signed into law by Governor Ricardo Roselló, will impact negatively on workers' wages, overtime, vacations, job security and health care in both the public and private sectors.

Another proposed law, House Bill 454, is opposed by the public-sector unions because it would, under the aegis of "employee mobility," attack longtime standards regarding job security, probation, sick leave and layoffs.

Chilean telecom workers strike over working conditions

Workers for Chilean branches of telecommunications giant Movistar began an indefinite strike over working conditions February 4,

shutting offices in three cities.

The workers' union and the company have negotiated for over a month without reaching an agreement over working conditions and salaries. Union president Nora Salgado said that the employer would have used a lockout to close offices for 30 days without paying workers.

Argentine labor ministry orders airline workers to call off planned strike over failed negotiations

Argentina's Cockpit Workers Association (APTA) called off a previously-announced walkout on February 1, the Labor Ministry stepped in to prevent the walkout by ordering "obligatory conciliation," a form of binding arbitration in which ministry representatives will mediate. APTA suspended the strike and its members will continue to work while the parties negotiate.

The union had announced on January 31 that its members, who work for the Chile-based LATAM airline, would strike for 24 hours on February 1. APTA complained that LATAM was disregarding rules established between the two and was stonewalling in negotiations.

Among the complaints were LATAM's backtracking on a wage raise agreement, the number of workers on each plane and lack of clarification on the specific duties for some employees.

Union suppresses wildcat strike over firing of California worker

Technicians who install TV satellite dishes for DirecTV ended their picketing at the company's McClellan, California office and returned to work February 3 after the union and parent company AT&T agreed to discuss the firing of a worker. Anthony Estrada, a two-year employee, accidentally left a \$300 meter at a work site and was fired on February 1.

Two days later, some 130 of his fellow workers walked off the job and declared they would not return to work until Estrada was rehired. According to corporate management, they met with the Communications Workers of America and cleared the firing of Estrada before taking action.

When workers initially walked off the job, they demanded Estrada's rehiring before they returned to work, but the CWA agreed to merely discuss the issue with the company. "It's definitely a win," said CWA Local 9421 vice-president Mike Felmann. Estrada said of the deal, "It didn't go 100 percent the way we wanted to, but it's still not over yet."

The CWA is currently in negotiations with AT&T over a new contract covering 2,000 DirecTV technicians. On February 1, the day Estrada was fired, AT&T reached an agreement with the CWA over 500 DirecTV technical service center employees.

Cinema tech workers carry through one-day strike over company refusal to negotiate working conditions

Dozens of workers at Deluxe Technicolor Digital Cinema carried out a one-day strike February 2 at the company's Burbank, California, offices over unfair labor practice charges. In September of 2016, workers voted by a 43-20 margin to join the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and in January, workers submitted a petition to Deluxe for fair and just pay.

But the company has instead been making unilateral adjustments to working conditions that led to last week's strike. The action was called a "warning shot" and workers issued a statement, declaring, "With one collective voice, in a sincere effort to avoid disruptive labor disputes, we want to send a message to management: Deluxe doesn't work without us."

Currently, no negotiations have been scheduled between the union and management.

Quebec paramedics launch "unlimited" strike

The 1,000 Urgences-Santé paramedics who serve Montreal and Laval launched a "general unlimited" strike Sunday, February 5. They join some 2,000 ambulance drivers and paramedics in other parts of Quebec who initiated strike action in recent days.

Under Quebec's reactionary labor laws, paramedics are forced to provide "essential services" at all times, meaning the strike's impact will largely be token. Its biggest impact will be on billing for ambulance services, since the strikers are not legally obliged to perform their normal administrative tasks.

The main points of dispute are wages, workload, and pensions. The paramedics, who have been working without contracts since March 2015, complain of chronic understaffing and severe job-related stress. One of their main demands is the elimination of shifts that require workers to be on-call from home 24/7.

A major factor driving the conflict is the tens of millions of dollars in cuts the Quebec Liberal government plans to make to the province's funding of ambulance services. Under the government's new funding plan, Urgences-Santé is projected to lose \$25 million per year—more than a quarter of its budget.

The two unions that bargain on behalf of Quebec's paramedics, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Quebec Federation of Labour, long delayed acting on the overwhelming strike mandates they received last fall.



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