Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 February 2017

Mexican university professors strike over unpaid benefits, salary demands

Some 720 professors at the Antonio Narro Autonomous Agrarian University (UAAAN) in Saltillo, in southeast Coahuila, Mexico, began a strike on February 16. The strike was also held at the southwest campus in Torreón. The educators' union, SUTAUAAN, called the walkout due to the administration's refusal to address demands regarding payments of at least 75 million pesos (US$3.67 million) into funds for medical, housing and loan services.

Because of the shortfall, the clinic that serves the professors lacks medicines. SUTUAAAN has accused the rector, Jesús Valenzuela García, of refusing to discuss salary and benefit demands, respectively 3.08 and 1.98 percent, as well. The union also alleges that Valenzuela García has intimidated the students with threats that the government would close the institution, and has formed "shock groups" who have confronted striking teachers and attempted to prevent them from blocking the university's main entrance.

In spite of a ruling by the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JFCA) labeling the strike as "inappropriate—due mostly to procedural technicalities—it has continued.

Mexican mineworkers strike over job cuts

Mineworkers at one of Mexico's main gold and silver mines, Primero Compañía Minera in Tayoltilta, Durango, downed their tools on February 16. The walkout was a reaction to the company's stated intention to lay off 300 workers. The Canadian-owned firm employs some 1,000 union members and 500 contract workers.

The workers are members of Mine and Metallurgy Workers National Syndicate sections 21 and 22, which have been in contract negotiations with the company since February 7. The union accused Primero Compañía Minera of abruptly attempting to scrap the negotiations on February 12 and "start from zero" and cut the 300 workers.

The union had previously agreed to delay striking for 10, then 15 days, but after the company's "backward march" the workers, by "absolute unanimity," voted in assembly to ratify the walkout.

The Labor Secretariat has intervened and is holding tripartite talks with the ostensible purpose of arriving at "a point of agreement between the parties." The secretariat's delegate, Miguel Bermúdez Quiñones, claimed that the enterprise "for the last two years has been in a process of modernization of equipment and in some areas they are making substitution of manpower," reported *El Sol de Durango*.

Argentine bank employees' union agrees to wage raise, calls off 72-hour strike

After nearly nine hours of negotiations with management, representatives of Argentina's La Asociación Bancaria (AB) banking employees' union signed an agreement February 16. The union called off a three-day strike they had planned to begin the next day and told its members to return to work.

The meeting followed a February 15 ruling by the Labor Appeals National Chamber, ordering the Central Bank and ABA private foreign bankers association to comply with the agreement signed with the AB last November. The parties agreed to a raise of 23.5 percent until the end of December 2017, supposedly to keep ahead of inflation, which officially is projected at between 12 and 17 percent. However, the government is notorious for habitually underestimating the inflation rate.

An "extraordinary bonus" of between 21,600 and 40,000 pesos (US$1,380 and $2,555), according to category, will be paid on Bank Employee's Day, November 6. *La Nación* reported, "The agreement, which was not officially authorized by the government, puts at risk the official plan regarding salary policy anticipated for 2017."

Puerto Rican professors vote for two-day strike against budget cuts

The Puerto Rican University Professors Association (APPU) voted in assembly February 17 not to hold classes on February 23 and 24. The vote was taken in reaction to the decision of the Fiscal Supervision Board (JSF) to cut US$300 million from the budget of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). APPU President José Raúl Rivera called the cut "a mortal blow" to the public university.

UPR has already been savaged by cuts from the Special Law of Fiscal and Operational Sustainability imposed in 2014. According to former UPR interim president Celeste Freytes, even closing down eight campuses would not meet the amount proposed by the JSF; in fact, another $100 million would need to be slashed.

In recent months, there has been an "avalanche of resignations" in the UPR system, according to *El Nuevo Día*, including nine rectors, a vice president of student affairs and a vice president of research and technology.

Students at some campuses have held protests and strikes. A demonstration is planned for February 23 in San Juan at the capitol building.

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Puerto Rican Uber drivers strike for four hours to protest fare reduction

Drivers for the Uber ride service struck from 6 to 10 a.m. on February 13 to protest a recent rate reduction imposed by the company. On February 8, the firm told its drivers that the rate would drop 25-35 percent. An Uber spokesperson claimed that the rate cut has benefited both drivers and riders, since more people have been willing to avail themselves of the service at the lower rate.

Drivers dispute the claim, especially in the case of long trips, which may not carry passengers on the way back, and when heavy traffic takes up extra time. Drivers complain that Uber's response to their objections is "take it or leave it."

Guyana: Former sugar cane workers protest to demand severance pay

Some 40 former workers for the now-closed Wales Sugar Estate in West Bank Demerara, Guyana protested to the Ministry of the Presidency February 13 to demand severance pay. The protesters also voiced their opposition to being forced to commute as much as 40 miles to work at the Uitvulgt Estate, which is planning to increase its production. The next day, over 300 "redundant" cane cutters and transporters converged on the office.

In January of 2016, the government announced its intention to close down the Wales estate, run by state-owned GuySuCo, by the end of the year. In spite of protests by workers, the plant, which had employed over a thousand workers, was closed down on schedule. GuySuCo claimed that in meetings with officials of the workers' union, the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), it had agreed for employees to be transferred to Uitvulgt. GAWU disavows that claim.

The Agricultural Ministry claims that all workers who were entitled to severance pay have been paid. Workers and GAWU accuse GuySuCo of insisting that the workers "have to go" to Uitvulgt.

One worker told inewsguyana.com that the Uitvulgt estate is 22 miles from Wales, and the worksite is 15 miles into the estate. "So when I calculate from Wales to Uitvlugt, it is anything like about 40 miles to reach the worksite. I said when you leave home at 4 o'clock in the morning and reach Uitvlugt at 10, what kind of work can you do to get a day's pay?" he was quoted.

Workers have planned for more protest actions, including a public meeting on February 21.

Iowa legislation guts collective bargaining, paves way for new attacks on public workers

A bill that will gut collective bargaining for 120,000 Iowa public sector workers passed the Iowa legislature last week and now awaits the governor's signature. The bill radically alters what is known as "Chapter 20," a 1974 bill that banned public workers from striking and mandated that 14 issues must be arbitrated, including wages, insurance and grievances.

The recent legislation removes health insurance and supplemental pay from those arbitrated categories and will allow government agencies to impose concessions on workers at will and without recourse to strike action. The legislation exempts law enforcement and other public safety workers.

The Republicans, who control the legislature and governorship, have championed the legislation. Democrats and the labor unions have opposed it from the standpoint that Chapter 20 has in the last 42 years successfully led to voluntary agreements in 98 percent of cases without arbitration while suppressing the living standards of Iowa workers. Currently, teachers rank 25th in the nation in terms of pay.

Chapter 20 came in the wake of a militant 1974 teachers strike that resulted in the jailing of teachers. The Democrats and state labor unions are taking pains to suppress an upheaval like what took place in Wisconsin in 2011 when workers opposed similar legislation by Governor Scott Walker.

Brewery union schedules contract vote

After resuming negotiations with Molson Coors over the weekend, officials of Local 325 of the Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers scheduled a membership meeting for February 26, where the lone agenda item will be a vote on a tentative contract. No further details have been released by the union.

Some 320 workers have been on strike at the Toronto brewery since January 12, after voting 99.7 percent to take job action against vicious concessions demanded by the company. Molson Coors had insisted that workers take a 7 percent cut in their wages and benefits. Union officials had countered with offers of concessions that included reductions in overtime pay, a shift to straight time weekend pay and a regressive change to worker pension contributions.

In the very expensive Toronto environment, workers only earn on average about $50,000 (CDN) annually. Corporate president Mark Hunter pockets more than $6 million per year while the transnational company has posted years of steady profits. Corporate management has threatened to bring in replacement workers to break the strike should the work stoppage continue.

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