

Workers Struggles: the Americas

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5 December 2017

Canada

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Unionized workers at the Halifax Shipyard, operated by Irving Shipbuilding, gave an overwhelming strike mandate at a well-attended meeting Sunday. The agreement between the shipyard and Unifor Marine Workers Local 1 expires at the end of the month. The workers are currently building Arctic and offshore patrol vessels.

Formal talks began two months ago. Unifor and the shipyard owners are currently in the process of scheduling talks with a conciliator. The main issues in dispute appear to be work breaks, seniority and paid sick time. Management says it wants to combine the morning break and lunch periods, by paying workers for the extra 10 minutes at lunch.

A Unifor spokesman accused management of presenting “33 pages of major concessions” including the elimination of most safety provisions. The union said it was asking for four additional sick days per year to take into account unexpected situations.

In 2010, Irving won the contract to build between six and eight of the Arctic and offshore patrol vessels for \$2.3 billion. The company is the prime supplier for the combat portion of the Canadian government’s national shipbuilding strategy. In addition to the patrol vessels it holds contracts to build 15 warships with a price tag of \$26 billion.

Rather than seeking to unify workers, Unifor has stirred up a filthy nationalist campaign, denouncing management for hiring 27 ironworkers from Lithuania and Romania under the government’s Atlantic Immigration Pilot Project, claiming the jobs should have gone to Canadians.

Newfoundland workplace death probe flawed

In dismissing charges against the employer, a judge in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) characterized the investigation into the 2015 death of a construction worker as inadequate in the failure to gather evidence to bring a conviction.

Twenty-year-old CJ Curtis died of injuries sustained while working on a Southern Construction job site that led to four health and safety charges against the company. Judge James Walsh dismissed the charges in September of this year leading to a review that is currently underway into a number of problems named in his ruling. These include a delay of over eight hours before photographs were taken, and for health and safety officials to arrive at the scene. In addition he cited the RCMP for failing to secure the accident site, which prevented the collection of necessary

evidence.

A recent CBC investigation has determined that only five employers have faced jail sentences in 251 workplace fatalities in the last decade in Canada, with a maximum term of 120 days in jail. All 11 that took place in Newfoundland resulted in fines averaging \$70,000 but no imprisonment. NL government officials have said that further review is needed to determine what led to the dismissal of charges in this case.

Latin America

Mexican airline pilots stage brief walkout over firing of colleague

A group of nearly 60 pilots for Aeroméxico Connect, a regional affiliate of international airline Aeroméxico, struck for a few hours November 28. The pilots walked out to protest the firing of a colleague, who had been obliged to fly with a tumor in his neck. Connect fired him, claiming that he had a history of poor performance. About 40 flights were canceled or delayed.

The strike was not authorized or supported by the Aviator Pilots Syndical Association (ASP), who intervened quickly to order the pilots back to work. An ASPA spokesman said that there would be an investigation to determine if the sacking was unjustified. He also said that there would be no sanctions against the pilots who struck.

On November 30, however, Aeroméxico fired José Fernández Aguirre, an ASPA official who had 15 years with the airline, saying that he had not gotten the backing of the ASPA executive committee. Aeroméxico later emailed personnel, saying that it would act against whoever “organized this illegal strike,” who furthermore would “suffer significant and forceful sanctions by way of regulatory authority.”

Since then, three members of the ASPA executive committee who had participated in the strike have resigned, and they may face expulsion from the union. Another official was put on leave pending the investigation, which has a deadline of December 15. ASPA also announced that it would take “strong measures” toward seven pilots who were identified as responsible for the walkout.

Workers in Oaxaca, Mexico hold protests over pay, conditions

Workers from several sectors in the Mexican city of Oaxaca took protest actions last week over pay and working conditions. The protests have taken the form of strikes, marches and blockades.

Academic workers at the University of Oaxaca went on strike, complaining of nonpayment of retirement funds, reimbursement for expenses to some workers and payment of grants.

Meanwhile, some 40 security personnel struck the Oaxaca International Airport, demanding payment of the last month's wages. Five of the workers have been fired so far, and the strikers are pleading with authorities to intervene.

At the Doctor Aurelio Valdivieso Civil Hospital, doctors and nurses who began an indefinite strike on November 22 began blocking streets leading to the facility on November 28. They also blocked the entrance to another hospital in the area. Their demands included adequate equipment, uniforms, supplies and medications.

On December 1, the hospital workers' union announced that it had called off the strike after getting promises of a new PET scan device to replace one that had ceased to function, and X-ray equipment by December 30, as well as a "revision" of the distribution of medicines. The issue of uniforms and shoes has not been addressed; the union said that it would appeal to the government.

Strike by Peruvian copper miners continues

A strike at three mines owned by Southern Copper in Peru that began November 21 entered its 10th day on November 30 following failed talks between the Unified Workers Syndicate (SUT) and management over wage and benefit issues.

The union's demands include a larger share of profits and better medical benefits. Another issue is the rehiring of dismissed workers. The workers struck over these and other issues last April, but returned to work after failing to get agreements.

Southern Copper claims that the walkout has not made a dent in production and, citing the declaration by the Labor Ministry of the strike's illegality, has threatened to fire striking workers.

One-day strike by Argentine public health workers against privatization

Doctors and other health professionals for 80 Buenos Aires public hospitals, as well as municipal hospitals and health clinics, held a 24-hour strike on December 1. The mobilization was called by CICOP, the Buenos Aires health professionals' union.

Talks with representatives of the provincial government of María Eugenia Vidal, an ally of right-wing president Mario Macri, have reached an impasse. CICOP's demands included a salary raise, reopening of parity talks, an increase in the health care budget and the reclassification of temporary contract workers to permanent status. In addition, CICOP is calling on the Vidal administration to comply with agreements already signed in 2017.

CICOP also opposes reforms pushed by Vidal, such as the Universal Health Coverage (CUS), which the union says is an attempt to privatize health care by "defunding day by day...increasing the insecurity of the most vulnerable section of society."

CICOP claimed high adherence to the strike and protest, which took place in front of the National Health Ministry Obelisk. Further protest actions are being planned.

One-day "warning strike" by Chilean childcare workers to demand better pay, conditions

Workers for Integra, Chile's national preschool program, held a one-day "warning strike" on December 1. The striking workers, who care for children from three months to five years of age, are members of SINATI (National Integra Foundation Workers Syndicate) and National Syndicates Nos. 1 and 2.

A SINATI press release said that the goal of the mobilization was to "pressure the government and the Parliament so that the resources that are given by means of the budget allocation consider the improvement of the salary and labor conditions of Integra, thus assuring the quality of early education in Chile."

The unions added that they would not rule out continuing the strike if the authorities did not respond to their concerns.

Trinidad and Tobago: offshore oil workers protest conditions

Workers for offshore labor supply contractor JSL International in Trinidad and Tobago marched to the firm's entrance on December 1 to hold a protest. Holding picket signs and chanting, the workers denounced JSL for unfair treatment, refusal to pay for compensation to injured workers and noncompliance with their contract with the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU).

OWTU president Ancel Roget attended the protest and referred to a worker who said that he had to wait for two days before being taken ashore after he was injured. He alleged that the worker had yet to be compensated and properly treated.

A JSL spokesperson accused the union of "using unwarranted and baseless means and ways of restitution," and said that the company would use the Ministry of Labour and Industrial Court to bring complaints against employees.

Jamaican bauxite workers protest nonpayment of job security, pay, benefits

About 40 temporary workers at the JISCO Alpart bauxite/aluminum plant in Nain, St. Elizabeth, Jamaica walked out and held a protest over the company's announcement that it will not pay customary Christmas bonuses this year. Recent years have seen the cutting of the annual bonus payment throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Other issues figured in the protest, including the low base pay rate, the lack of safety gear and the fact that they have been working without contracts since February. Uncertainty over vacation leave, sick leave and health insurance are other outstanding complaints.

Following a meeting with Union of Clerical, Administrative and Supervisory Employees officials, the workers agreed to go back to work, and to meet again to discuss the issues.

The United States

Planned layoff of 200 workers at Brooklyn hospital

Hospital workers were warned of layoffs beginning December 15 at Maimonides Medical Center in the Borough Park area of Brooklyn in New York City. About 200 of the 6,500 workers there, members of SEIU (Service Employees International Union) 1199 and the New York State

Nurses Association, could be affected, including nurses, clerical staff, radiology technicians, phlebotomists, chemists, patient transporters and others.

The Maimonides administration stated, “Maimonides—like hospitals across the region and country—is working through the reality of our industry’s economics: flat or declining government reimbursement rates coupled with rising costs...” Maimonides lost \$14.2 million on operations in the first three quarters of this year.

Maureen Piccione, a Chemistry Lab worker for 30 years, told laborpress.org, “We’re short-staffed, we’re overworked and underpaid. We’re forced to do overtime and I don’t see how they can lay people off.” Yet the Medical Center says it is working to grow its physicians’ network and increase patient volume.

Union leaders’ chief complaint is that management did not include them in budget-cutting decisions. The union has offered other measures for the hospital to cut costs, including freezing hiring and overtime hours, as well as calling for employees earning more than \$150,000 to temporarily reduce their pay.

New York City’s Health and Hospital Corporation has reduced monthly hiring by 25 percent at 25 hospitals. This is as a result of a reduction of state funding due to federal cuts already underway during the Obama Administration.

Unpaid work scheme exposed in Oklahoma

An investigative report has exposed how an Oklahoma judge used a work rehab camp to force convicts to perform unpaid labor. The program, named Southern Oklahoma Addiction Recovery (SOAR), sent convicts to work at a Coca Cola bottling plant and other businesses as an alternative to serving prison time. In fact many of those forced to work in the program had not been convicted, making the scheme a possible violation of the 13th Amendment’s ban on slavery and involuntary servitude.

SOAR currently houses 45 men who work at the bottling plant as well as a carwash (owned by a SOAR board member), a Bed Bath & Beyond store and several other businesses. Instead of paying the men, the companies reimburse SOAR, thus avoiding payroll and workers compensation taxes.

While in the program, men were forced to sign up for food stamps, then turn over their cards to SOAR. Every few weeks SOAR officials would force the men to use the cards to buy food for the entire group. Men were also required to attend church services twice a week.



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