

## Mexican teachers strike, Georgia school bus drivers fired for protesting poverty pay

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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### Mexican teachers strike to demand payment of overdue wages

Around 15,000 teachers in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua began an indefinite strike April 17 to demand the payment of salaries and benefits owed to temporary and recently hired educators. The National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE) Section 42 claims over a thousand interim and new teachers have not been paid, some for over a year.

An estimated 1,050 elementary schools throughout the state were closed, and protest actions took place in more than 20 cities. In the capital city of Chihuahua, 400 protesters, among them parents and student supporters of the strike, marched on April 19 to the government palace to support an encampment outside the building housing the Budget and Education secretariats.

SNTE 42 officials have said the strike will continue until the last teacher is paid. However, the national union is infamous for its ties with the state, betrayals of struggles, breakaways, splits and corruption, typified by the 2013 arrest and conviction of general secretary Elba Esther Gordillo for embezzlement.

### Mexican sanitation workers stop work to demand benefit payments

Workers for the trash collection business Trasmocasa in Acapulco struck on April 20 to demand the payment of benefits, vacation pay and profit sharing. The walkout affected trash collection in 30 neighborhoods in the city's central zone.

The workers also declared that the strike was in solidarity with a fellow employee who was detained and jailed following an accident. The company disavowed any responsibility since its trucks are not insured.

The next day, the workers said that they would continue the strike until their demands were met. However, the head of Zonatur, the city's tourism agency, said trash collection services would not be affected, since it had found contractors to perform the work done by Trasmocasa. By noon the workers ended the strike and went back to work.

### 90,000 construction workers in Panama strike over wages

Over 90,000 workers in Panama's construction industry began a strike April 18 after negotiations between their national union, SUNTRACS, and the Panamanian Chamber of Construction (CAPAC) failed to reach an agreement on wage raises. The parties have been negotiating for six

months over a contract that will be in effect until 2022. Most of the provisions have been agreed upon, but the gap between SUNTRACS's and CAPAC's proposals remains a sticking point. The employers offered a 0.5 percent raise—2 cents an hour, equal to about US\$4.00 per month—while SUNTRACS's original demand was a 15 percent raise per year.

Since then, CAPAC has raised its offer to 11 cents per hour over four years while SUNTRACS has lowered its demand to 12.5 percent annually. A report on the Building and Wood Workers International web site points out that the booming construction industry in Panama reaped profits of US\$8.1 billion in 2016 and US\$9.1 billion in 2017.

### Strike by Chilean airline cabin crew continues over working conditions, benefits

Following an April 17 meeting with the vice president of LATAM airlines, cabin crewmembers for its Chilean affiliate LAN Express voted April 20 to reject the company's latest offer and continue the strike they began April 10. According to a [biobiochile.cl](http://biobiochile.cl) report, 91.4 percent of the members voted against the proposal.

The primary issue in the current conflict is scheduling of shifts, with the workers demanding less onerous scheduling with more rest time. Though the company offered to reduce the shift times, "the operators decided to reject the proposal since [LATAM] took away "other benefits" that equally affected hours of rest," said the report. It added, "Also, the union rejects that the company extends some labor benefits to the workers who are not unionized."

### Chilean sanitation workers strike over unpaid overtime

Trash collection workers in Santiago, Chile voted the night of April 18 not to collect trash on April 19. The workers accused the municipality of not paying promised overtime. The authorities committed to regularize the pay for extraordinary hours and weekends, according to the union, but did not deliver on its promise.

A municipal workers union official told reporters that some workers were owed around 90,000 pesos (US\$151) in unpaid wages. By noon, the vice-mayor announced the overdue wages had been deposited and were available to the workers, and that the nonpayment was due to "an administrative error," and that there would be an investigation. The next day, the union called the workers back to the job.

### **Atlanta area school bus drivers fired for job action**

School district officials in DeKalb County, Georgia, part of the Atlanta metropolitan area, have fired seven school bus drivers for being “ringleaders” of a sickout protest over poverty level wages and poor working conditions. School superintendent Stephen Green told local media, “we have evidence that they were orchestrating or in many ways organizing this event, and that is illegal.”

One of the victimized workers, Marion Payne, told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* police officers from the school district dropped off a termination letter at his home last Thursday night. Payne, who had helped pass out flyers for the sickout, had been a school bus driver for five years. “I’m a veteran, I’m a concerned for all the senior [drivers] ... retiring and getting \$200 or \$210 a month,” he said. “But you know how it is, when they think you pose a threat.”

Drivers, many of whom earn less than \$24,000 a year, have been meeting for weeks with Superintendent Green, who has a \$300,000 base salary, plus \$2,600 a month in expenses, \$750 a month in transportation expenses, an annual \$15,000 bonus for each year he is retained as superintendent, plus \$24,000 a year toward his retirement plan. Drivers who are not in a union took the wildcat action to demand 50 improvements, including salary increases, cost of living payments and better retirement plans.

### **One-day strike by Florida transport workers over denial of wage increases**

Drivers and warehouse workers at XPO Logistics in Miami, Florida carried out a one-day strike April 9 claiming labor law violations. The strike follows a January ruling by an administrative law judge that ruled XPO management had denied raises to its unionized warehouse workers in Miami, while it gave wage increases to non-union warehouse workers at its other locations across the country.

Teamsters Local 769 unionized Miami XPO drivers and warehouse workers back in 2014 but have yet to obtain a contract. Since then, XPO has provided some increases to its Miami drivers but warehouse workers are being frozen out of wage increases.

XPO Logistics is the second largest company in the world offering freight brokerage services, whereby it connects shippers with transportation services. It is the largest provider of “final mile” delivery of heavy goods to customers such as Home Depot or Best Buy. It retains some 95,000 employees at 1,455 facilities in 32 countries.

Meanwhile, the Teamsters union officials approved a tentative contract with ABF Freight System covering 7,500 drivers, warehouse workers and office staff. While the union predictably hailed the contract, rank-and-file workers have denounced it on Facebook for failing to raise wages above the rate of inflation and address underfunded pensions.

### **Uber lawsuit pays out pennies to California drivers**

A settlement of a \$7.75 million lawsuit by Uber drivers began to pay out last week with some drivers receiving as little as 15 cents. In August 2014,

Uber driver Steven Price initiated a lawsuit charging the company with failure to pay minimum wages and overtime, missed meal and rest breaks and other issues.

But after attorney and administration costs and payouts to the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, less than \$1 million of the nearly \$8 million settlement remained to divvy up among Uber drivers. No official announcement on the individual payouts to drivers is available, but internet postings indicate drivers received various amounts from pennies to \$20.

The lawsuit alleged that Uber was scheming to treat drivers as contractors and not employees in an effort to skirt the minimal California labor standards. Investigations have indicated that many Uber drivers made less than the minimum wage.

### **USW official at Ohio Cooper Tire plant indicted for theft**

The former financial secretary for the union covering workers at Cooper Tire & Rubber Co. in Findlay, Ohio pleaded guilty last month to stealing union assets, according to a report in the *Toledo Blade*. Ronald G. Coldren, 56, of Findlay pleaded guilty to theft from a labor organization in US District Court. Judge Jack Zouhary scheduled sentencing for July 18.

In an indictment filed last year, Coldren was accused of stealing nearly \$31,000 from United Steelworkers Local 207L between April, 2012, and Jan. 15, 2016. In March 2012, the USW betrayed workers who were locked out for three months at the Findlay plant, accepting management’s demands to re-rate jobs, lower wage rates and drive out older, higher paid workers, replacing them with young workers making \$13 an hour. Although it sat on a \$150 million strike fund, the USW refused to provide strike benefits to the locked out workers, handing out only a few hundred dollars worth of gift cards for groceries.

### **Striking Labrador ironworkers reject new deal**

There is no end in sight to the nearly month-long strike by 1,000 ironworkers against the Iron Ore Company of Canada (IOC) in Labrador City after workers voted last week to soundly reject the latest offer presented to them by their union, the United Steelworkers.

While no details of the proposed agreement have been made public, union negotiators report that although the demand by the company to allow for temporary workers was dropped, new obstacles to full-time employment were included in the latest offer. New provisions would extend the probationary period for new-hires and provide for a two-tiered system of worker rights. Workers are also seeking improvements in wages and benefits. IOC is 59 percent owned by mining giant Rio Tinto Ltd. which is based in Australia.

### **Strike threat at Canadian Pacific Railway**

After blocking a strike at Canadian Pacific Railway over the weekend, the Teamsters and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) now say a walkout by 3,460 train conductors, engineers and signal maintainers is “inevitable” after a government mediator brought back an unacceptable deal.

Late Friday the unions agreed to a recommendation from federal mediators that the Canadian Industrial Relations Board administer a ratification vote, averting a potential walkout starting at midnight. Both unions now saying they recommend members reject the company offer. Doug Finnon, president of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, said, "The government will bring this ridiculous offer to our members and we strongly recommend that members vote against it."

Rank-and-file workers are outraged over years of concessions accepted by the unions. They want wages and fatigue issues addressed and a resolution of the more than 8,000 grievances filed against CP by Teamster members over the last three years. Earlier this month, members of the Teamsters and IBEW voted 94 percent and 98 percent in favor of a strike.

### **Windsor casino strike enters third week**

An estimated 2,300 casino and hotel workers have been on strike at Caesar Windsor since April 6 to fight for improved wages and demand full-time positions for part-time workers. Hundreds of workers are employed as casual labor, working no more than one shift a week, and about 700 others are part-time. This is the fourth walkout at the casino since it opened 23 years ago, with the last strike in 2004 lasting 42 days.

Unifor president Jerry Dias spoke at a rally Sunday outside the casino, which is located across the river from Detroit, Michigan. Dias has overseen the betrayal of autoworkers and auto parts workers, including at the Big Three automakers and CAMI, and has done everything to isolate the strike by casino workers who are members of Unifor Local 444. Bargaining between Unifor and Caesars Windsor resumed last Wednesday but talks broke off after only a few hours.

### **Windsor newspaper workers set to strike**

After working without a contract since the end of 2016, workers at the *Windsor Star* are set to walk off the job as early as May 5 after voting over 97 percent in favor of strike action last week.

The 190 unionized employees include engravers, press workers and office staff among others who are members of the Communication Workers of America (CWA). According to the union, negotiators for PostMedia which owns the *Star* are demanding a range of concessions on pensions, benefits and vacation provisions in a new contract.

Most of the workers affected are considered part-time and constitute only a skeleton staff after the latest round of job-cuts at the paper. PostMedia cancelled the most recently scheduled talks two weeks ago and no new talks are scheduled before the strike deadline.



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