Mexican Home Depot workers threaten strike; British Columbia forestry strike in seventh month

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 January 2020

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Mexican home improvement store workers set to strike for pay, benefits

More than 6,000 workers employed by Home Depot in Mexico were put on alert last week to walk off the job if the home improvement retailer does not comply with a number of demands presented by the Revolutionary Confederation of Laborers and Farmworkers (CROC). A strike would impact at least 12 states as well as Mexico City, the national capital.

Among CROC's demands are a 20 percent pay raise and 20 days per year of paid vacation time, as well as programs to assist with transportation, food, savings funds and the education of workers' children. CROC is also calling for the end of sexual harassment, discrimination, arbitrary and unfair firings and flouting of labor rights.

CROC signed an accord containing similar demands last March with Walmart de México.

In its public pronouncements, CROC has referred to the US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement, known as USMCA in the US and T-MEC in Mexico, and called on Home Depot to comply with its provisions. The Home Depot public relations manager claims that the company's relationship with its " *asociados/as* " (associates, a common management term used to avoid the term " *trabajadores* ," i.e., workers) is excellent and that it complies with all federal labor laws. The T-MEC has been signed but not yet ratified.

Mexican epidemiology workers occupy building, demand compliance with agreement

On January 16, personnel of the Vectors (Malaria) section of the Health Secretariat of Oaxaca struck and occupied the offices of Oaxaca Health Services (SSO) Sanitary Jurisdiction 02 in the town of Juchitán. The workers demanded completion of commitments signed with their union, the National Syndicate of Health Secretariat Workers (SNTSA). The strike was called statewide.

Demands include payment for travel to communities to carry out programs against malaria and dengue. During December, about 90 workers worked 10 days in several regions, but have not been paid the daily 350 pesos (US$18.75) they are supposed to receive.

Another demand is the removal of the director of SSO Administration and Finances, whom they accuse of incompetence, poor administration and unwillingness to attend to their demands.

The SNTSA said that, as talks with SSO representatives develop, the blockade and occupation of the building will continue until progress is made.

Mexican health workers, nurses protest for overdue payments, uniforms, benefits

Workers for the Health Secretariat in the Mexican state of Yucatán demonstrated in front of the state Government Palace on January 17. The protesters' demands included the assigning of their uniforms, the payment of "road expenses" and compliance with "concept 30." The workers are members of section 68 of National Health Secretariat Workers Syndicate (SNTSS).

According to a *yucatan.com* report, "Concept 30 refers to the days that are granted to the workers after carrying out fumigation, so that they can detoxify, and 'road expenses' are the travel expenses incurred when they work in communities."

Joining the health workers were nurses demanding to be classified as nurses, since for the last five years they have been based as health technicians. They criticized the health secretary for avoiding them when they submitted petitions that he address their demands.

In a communiqué, the Health Secretariat claimed that the resources for the uniforms and concept 30 are of federal origin and so are not the state's responsibility.

Costa Rican public-sector workers protest bill limiting right to strike

Hundreds of public-sector workers protested in front of Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly January 16 against a bill that would severely restrict the right to strike. According to a *Tico Times* report, "The initiative prohibits strikes in essential public services such as health, safety, school lunchrooms, and water and energy supply. It also puts limits on work stoppages in education." In addition, the bill "would allow for the suspension of the salary of striking workers and imposes penalties for those who block roads as part of a work stoppage."

Assembly President Carlos Ricardo Benavides, who promoted the bill, claimed that it would "provide greater legal certainty to all sectors and guarantee that right [to strike] without affecting services." Undoubtedly,

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the law will be used against workers as more austerity is imposed upon them.

Preparations for the law date back to the three-month nationwide strike in late 2018 against proposed fiscal “reforms” —including cuts to social services and tax hikes—that would make the working class bear the brunt of the nation’s economic crisis. As the strike wore on, public-sector workers, especially teachers, came under heavy pressure from their unions to vote to end the strike. The fiscal plan was approved December 3, and shortly afterward the strike was called off.

The bill will require a second vote and ratification by President Carlos Alvarado, who has already declared his support.

Peruvian health workers hold 48-hour strike over salary demands

Assistance and administrative workers for the EsSalud social security program in Arequipa, Peru, struck on January 16 and 17 to press their wage demands. The Carlos Alberto Seguín Escobedo Hospital Workers Syndicate held a march through the streets of the city to underline the demand that EsSalud pay the raise it promised at the beginning of 2019, but never delivered.

The promised pay increase was to be between 300 and 400 soles (US$90.28 to US$120.37), according to the agreement between EsSalud and the union. The union has warned that it will call an indefinite strike if the money is not paid.

Chilean firefighters strike for improved wages, conditions

Some 300 firefighters in central Chile’s Bio Bío region began an indefinite strike January 16 to demand improvements in their wages and working conditions. The firefighters, who are employed by the National Forestry Corporation (Conaf), have not had a raise in five years. Their monthly wage is 330,000 pesos (US$427).

In addition to the wage hike, the firefighters are demanding better conditions, such as supplies, equipment and bases. The firefighters’ union had made repeated appeals to Conaf, to no avail. A meeting with the mayor and the regional director the morning of the 16th proved fruitless as well, precipitating the strike call.

Brazilian oil workers protest against the closure of Petrobrás plant

Oil workers held a demonstration on January 17 against the closure of Petrobrás’s fertilizer plant in Araucaria, in the metropolitan region of Curitiba in southern Brazil. The Araucaria unit has a daily production capacity of 1,975 tons of urea and 1,303 tons of ammonia, among other products. The closure will result in the dismissal of 396 direct employees and about 600 contractors. In solidarity, oil workers from Pernambuco in Brazil’s Northeast also held a demonstration at the Abreu e Lima Refinery. In 2018, Petrobrás had already closed two fertilizer plants, in Sergipe and Bahia.

Minnesota snowplow drivers strike over benefits

Negotiators for the union representing snowplow drivers and management officials for St. Louis County, Minnesota, returned to mediated talks January 19 as the strike by 170 workers, members of Teamsters Local 320, entered its fifth day over sick-leave accrual and other issues. St. Louis County, located in the far northwest part of Minnesota is, geographically, the state’s largest county, with 3,000 miles of roads. It was hit with significant snowfall following the launching of the strike.

According to the county, the sick-leave accrual cap was reduced from 1,500 hours to 1,150 hours for new hires during the 2012-2013 contract cycle. But snowplow drivers claim the concession was pushed through under an old leadership that has been voted out of office and two other county bargaining units still retain the old 1,500-hour cap. Workers voted 117-8 to reject the county’s final offer the previous weekend.

Veteran snowplow drivers can retire with 1,900 hours of sick leave and be reimbursed an amount equal to 11 months of pay. The 1,150-hour cap is equivalent to only six months’ pay.

Striking heavy-equipment operator Jim Johnson told the *Duluth News Tribune*, “It’s gotten to the point where it seems like with every contract we have, [it] has been chop, chop, chop on benefits—and wages have nowhere near followed.”

Vancouver Island forestry strike in seventh month

About 3,200 coastal forestry workers in British Columbia, employed by Western Forest Products, remain on strike after walking out July 1 when contract talks between the company and the United Steelworkers Workers (USW) union broke down. Renewed bargaining in November and December failed to result in a settlement. On January 9, the USW met with mediators to offer concessions regarding alternate shift schedules. However, management quickly rejected the climb-down, insisting that the union must also agree to accept the contracting-out proposals being demanded by the company.

The strike is the longest in the history of the coastal forestry industry. It was a bitter four-and-a-half-month strike in 1986 that won worker protection against the contracting out of jobs.

The company has declared its demand for concessions in disability benefits, shift flexibility, safety and job security is due to a weaker market in the United States, which has led to a 50 percent decline in lumber prices over the last year. A company demand for a draconian restructuring of the pension program was withdrawn during the November talks.

Workers voted overwhelmingly by 98 percent to strike last June after management rejected union proposals during talks. The company is Vancouver Island’s largest forestry business, with sales of almost C$1.2 billion, net income of C$69.2 million, and a total liquidity of C$250.4 million for 2018. The USW is also trying to starve the strikers into submission. While the union claims to have a C$500 million strike fund, since July it has been doling out a miserly C$20 a day in strike pay.

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