Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Mexican academic workers protest contract violations

Academic workers at the Benito Juárez University of Oaxaca (UABJO) carried out protests last week, blocking roads and entries to the campus, known as University City. The workers, members of the University of Oaxaca Academic Workers Syndicate (STAUO), hung hand-lettered banners demanding the dismissal of the rector Eduardo Bautista, denouncing him as a "pseudo-rector" and a "puppet."

STAUO, claiming that Bautista was installed illegally and that his term ended months ago, called for the UABJO University Council to hold an election for a new rector. The union also demanded an end to various violations of the collective bargaining contract and delivery of dues to the union.

Bermudian firefighters' dispute over cuts in resources, training, conditions referred to arbitration

Last week, Bermuda's Labour Ministry referred a dispute between the Bermuda Fire and Rescue Service Association's (BFRS) firefighters and management to arbitration in the Employment and Labour Relations Tribunal. The firefighters have been at loggerheads with management and the government for years against the steady deterioration of resources, equipment and conditions.

The BFRS's last budget was cut by $1.24 million. (The Bermudan dollar is pegged to the US dollar.) The budget included cuts to training, repair and maintenance of vehicles and equipment, and the defunding of five unfulfilled posts. Breakdowns of vehicles and lack of equipment have led to demoralization, stress and lives endangered.

BFRS management says that it has made frequent requests to the same government that claims to want to resolve the dispute. At the same time, the labour minister threatened firefighters by citing Bermuda's labour law, which says that "any lockout, strike or irregular industrial action short of a strike [during arbitration] is unlawful …" making any "offenders" liable to "a civil penalty as may be imposed by the Employment and Labour Relations Tribunal."

Bahamian bank employees hold sickout over stalled agreement

A number of workers at the Central Bank of the Bahamas called in sick on December 2. The main reason for the sickout was the fact that a new industrial agreement to replace the one that expired in January has not been finalized.

The workers, members of the Union of Central Bankers, have held other protests against the snail's pace of the negotiations, including a temporary walkout in June. In addition to stalling, bank officials have unilaterally changed some of the terms of the agreement. For example, the bank eliminated a wellness bonus that had been in the contract for years, union president Theresa Thompson told *Tribune242*.

Another issue is the impact of changes brought by the pandemic. While most of the bank employees are currently working at home, management refuses to make any allowances for extra expenses: "more light, more water," according to Thompson.

The union has filed trade disputes with the Labour Ministry, which met with the union last week, but apart from a pro forma statement by minister Keith Bell that "there are a number of agreements that have many outstanding issues – pay, issues relating to wage, hours of work, overtime, etc.," the government did not say what it would do.

Uruguayan bus drivers' union calls one-day strike over wages, unemployment

The National Transport Workers Union (Unott) in Uruguay resolved to call a 24-hour strike by interdepartmental bus drivers December 6 in order for all workers to attend a general assembly and to underline "total discontent" with wage negotiations and with layoffs, some which have been in effect for up to two years.

Workers have not had a raise in two years, according to Unott president Juan Arellano. Government intransigence "does not leave us sufficient air to cope," he told reporters. The goal of the assembly would be to "improve the guidelines and for there to be trustworthy rotation" of layoffs for those with two years of unemployment.

Another goal of the assembly call was to discuss the way forward if the government's stance does not change.

Workers at Uruguayan distribution plant hold one-day strike over changes in workdays

Workers for the Ancap distribution plant in La Tablada, Montevideo, Uruguay went on indefinite strike December 3 in order to hold an assembly that was characterized by its union, Fancap, as "grave and urgent." At the assembly, the union resolved "not to

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accept any change that represents a modification of the agreed organization of work," according to Fancap secretary general Gerardo Rodríguez.

The union opposes Ancap's plan to extend business hours, maintaining that it "newly violates the accords reached at the end of the conflict," referring to a one-day nationwide general strike over firings in the firm. If the company does not scuttle its plans, Fancap said it would call a 24-hour strike on December 7.

Argentine state workers protest for end-of-year bonus and work clothing

Members of the State Workers Association (ATE) in Santa María, a city in Argentina's northern Catamarca province, held protests to demand the payment of their end-of-year bonus and the provision of work clothing. The protests followed one held December 1 over the same issues.

Provincial Governor Raúl Jalil had announced that, due to economic conditions, payment of the bonus was impossible this year. ATE officials say that they will "keep hardening the force measures because right here they still didn't hand over the protective clothing and we're already in December; they don't have a budget. Furthermore, we ask for the end-of-year bonus."

Seattle Teamsters concrete workers escalate strike

Teamsters ready mix drivers escalated a strike to encompass all concrete production in the Seattle, Washington region as another four companies were hit with picketing. Teamsters Local 174 first called out 34 dump truck drivers at Gary Merlino Construction on November 19. That was followed by another 100 drivers at Stoneway Concrete on December 1. The final walkouts occurred December 3 at Cadman, CalPortland, Salmon Bay Sand & Gravel, and Lehigh Cement and brought the number of strikers to over 300.

According to the Teamsters, the lead negotiator for the companies, Charles Oliver, originally proposed workers take concessions and only began to propose minuscule increases to that proposal. Workers resoundingly rejected the "last, best and final offer."

The cutting off of concrete to construction operations throughout the Puget Sound area is expected to be felt in short order. In a press release, Teamsters Local 174 President Rick Hicks sought to place blame solely on the lead negotiator for the construction companies and appeal to the profit interests of the owners, the very force that is pressing for concessions. "My message to the owners and managers of all these concrete companies is this: Charlie Oliver is not telling you the truth. He has completely bungled these negotiations, to the point where concrete has now stopped flowing and all of us are losing money."

Oregon hospital workers renew strike after negotiations fail to advance

Some 300 workers at McKenzie Willamette Medical Center in Springfield, Oregon, were slated to begin a five-day strike December 6 for higher compensation and improved working conditions. The strike comes after a two-day strike in October that failed to resolve any of the issues facing nursing assistants, housekeepers, therapists and pharmacy technicians who are members of the Service Employees International Union Local 49.

McKenzie Willamette negotiators have offered a proposal that raises health care premiums by 20 percent. Meanwhile, workers are demanding higher wages, improved health care and increased personal time off. In addition, strikers complain of under-staffing and insufficient COVID-19 measures to protect the health of workers. The SEIU claims management has plans to outsource bargaining unit jobs.

McKenzie-Willamette is owned by Tennessee-based Quorum Health Corporations which operates 22 hospitals in 13 states. The Springfield facility is one of the most profitable hospitals in Oregon. The SEIU charges that the $45 million in annual profits at McKenzie-Willamette is achieved largely through under-staffing.

11,000 Quebec day care workers on all-out strike

Support staff at about 400 public daycares in the province of Quebec, including those who work in maintenance, administration and kitchens, struck last Wednesday against the government's meager pay offer in a long-running contract dispute. The support staff, members of the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN), are demanding the government increase a wage offer of 9 percent over the next three years. The strike continues this week as negotiations continue.

The offer to the support staff does not match current or projected levels of inflation. In addition, the wage proposal was significantly inferior to the up to 20 percent increase the government has proposed for educators working within the same day care network. Both are members of the same union, together seeking a new contract. Educators have entered into the same indefinite strike alongside the support staff in a show of solidarity with the demands of their co-workers.

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