

# Workers Struggles: the Americas

12 July 2015

## **Mexican sweatshop workers protest wages, working conditions**

About 100 workers from four Johnson Controls sweatshops (called maquiladoras in Spanish) in the northern Mexico border town of Juarez protested their abysmal pay and harassment July 4. The workers marched to the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JLCA) with their complaints and some occupied the office.

According to *entrlneas.com.mx*, “The workers took over the offices...because the company didn’t comply with the [previous] citation that came about to expose the workers’ complaints.” The workers carried picket signs denouncing low pay, exploitation, sexual harassment, poor cafeteria food, speedups and other issues that the multinational giant has ignored.

The next day, some 700 to 800 workers struck and demonstrated in front of one of the firm’s four plants. Workers complained that while the company has garnered huge riches from the manufacture of automotive interiors, workers remain poor; “we don’t make enough to eat” was a common refrain at the demonstration. In addition, the company has imposed a production process that requires workers to do three operations instead of one for the same miserable pay.

On July 7, one of the maquiladoras was closed for six hours as workers refused to work and demanded better wages and an investigation into the abuses. The workers have demanded to speak with the president of the firm and warned if their demands are not attended to they will take over all four plants and stop production completely.

## **Brazilian teachers and others protest upcoming Olympics**

Rio de Janeiro was the scene of a protest against the Olympic Games on July 6. The majority of the demonstrators were teachers who have been on strike for three months because they have not been paid back wages. The protesters also decried the deterioration in public services and called for more money for education,

transportation, health care and other services.

Brazil’s Olympics construction projects have been subject to cost overruns, corruption scandals, accidents, structural collapses, workers’ deaths, strikes, squatters and other protests. The state government, at the point of bankruptcy, has requested federal emergency aid, which it claims will be available this week.

Protesters also denounced Michel Temer, who took over when president Dilma Rousseff was ousted by an impeachment vote. Toward the end of the protest, a small group vandalized bus stops and threw some stones. Police used stun grenades against them and arrested at least six.

## **72-hour strike by Brazilian electrical workers over salary talks, privatization plans**

Workers at state-controlled Centrais Eletricas Brasileiras SA, or Eletrobras, struck for three days beginning July 4. One the 10 largest energy conglomerates in the world, Eletrobras has been downsizing and selling off assets to bring down its debt of 40 billion reais (US\$12.3 billion). Privatization of some departments has also been proposed.

Meanwhile, Brazilian workers have been hammered by rising inflation as the nation’s economic crisis deepens. The Eletrobras Employees Association (Aeel), is demanding a 9.28 percent pay raise corresponding to the inflation rate up until May. The company delayed responding for four months, finally offering 5 percent. Eletrobras also wants to change the database that calculates inflation rates.

On July 6, Aeel and other unions called a protest in front of Eletrobras headquarters in Rio de Janeiro. Four union officials were arrested for blocking the entrance and “disobeying” soldiers deployed to the site.

## **Peruvian education workers vote for one-day strike**

School administrative workers in Peru’s northwest Lambayeque region voted on July 9 to carry out a one-day strike on July 14. The action’s purpose will be to demand that president Ollanta Humala to sign a Supreme

Decree granting an increase of 200 soles (US\$61.15) for about 800 workers.

The workers provide services such as security, maintenance, janitorial, library and other services to over 500 state educational institutions.

The strike is also meant to pressure the governor, Humberto Acuña, to put the law into effect. Union director Ulises Diaz Ruiz told *rpp.pe*, “This is the responsibility of Mr. Acuña’s functionaries, since they haven’t arranged the timely payment of this increment. It can’t be possible that they’ve already paid other regions and and they leave us on the sidelines.”

The workers also voted to go on indefinite strike if there is no response to their petition.

### **Connecticut health care workers strike over low pay and staff shortages**

Over 200 health care workers carried through a one-day strike July 1 at 25 facilities for the disabled owned by Whole Life, Inc. The members of Service Employees International Union Local 1199 are fighting for better wages and working conditions in an effort to avoid a heavy turnover rate that plagues the company’s operations and undermines care for patients.

One worker told the *Norwich Bulletin*, “When I started out 21 years ago the starting pay was \$12.89 an hour. Now it’s \$12 an hour... We’re working double shifts, triple shifts...” When a worker ends a shift and there is no staff member available to work the subsequent shift, they are compelled to remain on the job.

Another worker complained, “Our insurance is being increased 8 percent again. We bear the increase. They don’t want to give us anything. The cost of living has gone up and we haven’t gotten any raises in nine years.”

Local 1199, which represents 25,000 health care workers in Connecticut is limiting strike action of the workers and instead focusing its efforts on getting the state’s Department of Developmental Services Commissioner to investigate Whole Life.

### **Ontario university workers to strike**

Workers at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, west of Toronto are on strike this week after working without a contract for over a year.

Though most of the 110 workers affected are custodial staff, they also include skilled trades and groundskeepers who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). According to union negotiators one of the main obstacles to reaching a deal is the proposed

contracting out of jobs by the employer as well as proposals to cut retirement benefits by 15 per-cent.

University administration says that pay hikes of 1.5 percent included in its final offer will be implemented and that the school will remain open and operational throughout the strike.

### **Toronto area libraries on strike**

Eighteen public libraries in the city of Mississauga just west of Toronto, Ontario are on strike after negotiations broke down last week with no new talks scheduled.

Some 390 librarians and other workers in Mississauga are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) who have rejected a proposed contract containing annual wage increases of 1.5 percent which does not keep up with inflation and with negotiators pointing to increases of between 2.7 and 4.3 percent recently awarded to managers. Moreover, the union says that even as libraries are seeking to reduce the number of full-time workers, the majority are already part-time with no benefits, sick pay or vacation pay receiving just over the minimum wage.

Mississauga is the sixth-largest city in Canada yet library workers there are paid well below their counterparts in neighboring cities including Toronto.

### **Saskatchewan grocery chain facing job action**

Around 1,600 workers employed by Safeway stores across the province of Saskatchewan could be on strike or lockout this week after their union issued a strike notice last week and the parent company, Sobeys, responded with a lockout notice.

Safeway workers are represented by the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union which has been vague about what kind of job action they will take, but have hinted it may be less than an all-out strike, even though their last five-year contract expired in June of 2014.

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