

Mexican media workers strike, Montreal stevedores authorize strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 February 2020

Mexican media workers strike against contract violations, firings

Workers for the News Agency of the Mexican State (Notimex) in Baja California went on strike at midnight, February 21. The Notimex Workers Syndicate (SUTNOTIMEX) called the action, accusing management of refusing to negotiate in good faith over issues like contract violations, changes to the contract and firings.

The issue of the firings was highlighted by the union, since only 60 workers out of 223 are still working at Notimex, and in the last two weeks, the director, Sanjuana Martínez, has hired 60 new people rather than reinstate any of the fired workers. Notimex currently faces 85 labor-related lawsuits.

Police units were stationed at Notimex, and SUTNOTIMEX has accused the agency of hiring thugs to intimidate and assault strikers. The union has called on the Human Rights Commission and the Labor Secretariat to intervene.

Thousands attend anticorruption demonstrations in Belize

Twice last week—February 20 and 22—marches and rallies against government corruption, attended by thousands of workers, took place in Belize City, Belize. The actions were organized by the ten-union National Trade Union Congress (NTCU). Teachers, stevedores, water, electrical and other public service workers had a strong presence. Students, defying warnings from their rectories, also showed up for the protests.

Speeches at the rallies were dominated by trade union bureaucrats and a few opposition politicians, who denounced bribery and nepotism and demanded implementation of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, UNCAC. They also called for campaign finance reform and other reformist measures.

Glen Lewis, the president of the Southern Workers Union, was quoted by Amandala, “Today is the day when we must introduce hygiene in the politics of Belize. For us to introduce hygiene in the politics of Belize, the quality of life must improve; the misery index must go down; poverty must go down; healthcare must uplift. This is what we stand for. We are not playing games anymore.” The speakers did not enunciate a strategy to achieve these aims, other than calls to “take a stand” and “demand good governance” of politicians.

Puerto Rican medical services workers vote for strike authorization against privatization plans

Workers for Puerto Rico’s Medical Services Administration voted in favor of strike authorization for their union, the General Workers Union, over the possible privatization of the institution’s billing and payment departments. They also voted to oppose plans to privatize the Building and Refrigeration Service department.

Antigua & Barbuda: Health center workers protest unpaid wages, unhealthy conditions

After complaining numerous times to management about rat infestations, leaks in the roof, waterlogged grounds and other problems, in addition to unpaid back wages and overtime to no avail, workers picketed in front of St John’s Health Centre in St John’s, Antigua February 17. The workers had been told before that the problems would be fixed or that they would be moved to a different building, promises that never materialized.

Other demands include vehicles to replace the dilapidated old ones they now drive and

a consistent policy of incentive pay for vector control workers, who have to deal with rats, mosquitos and other pests that often carry diseases like dengue.

The workers’ response to the inattention has been a partial strike and picketing. They say they will only work until noon until their demands are met.

Bahamian water and sewerage workers back on the job after injunction issued

Workers for the Water and Sewerage Corporation (WSC) in the Bahamas were ordered back to work February 17 after nearly a week on strike. The workers, members of the Bahamas Utilities Services and Allied Workers Union (BUSAWU) and the Water and Sewerage Management Union, had walked out on February 11 over the refusal of WSC president Adrian Gibson to negotiate with the unions.

The unions’ main demand is that Gibson be removed and that a new industrial agreement be signed. Other issues include “overtime and holiday pay for post-Hurricane Dorian work; shift premium pay; the alleged hiring of new employees without existing employees having been given a chance to be promoted; docked salary for travel expenses; and removal of allowances for certain employees,” according to a Nassau Guardian report.

WSC, claiming that several of the demands had already been addressed, appealed to the country’s chief justice, who issued a temporary injunction, which will be in effect until the end of the month. He said that he would hear arguments from both sides on whether the strike is legal on February 17.

The unions say that they were forced to call the strike because of Gibson’s bullying. They also accuse the WSC of not following due process. Gibson threatened to dock striking workers pay. Citing the Industrial Relations Act, Labour Minister Dion Foulkes claimed that the strike “threatened the public interest” and referred it to the Industrial Tribunal, threatening jail time and fines if they refused.

Colombian teachers strike for 48 hours over violence and threats

Teachers in Colombia went on another temporary strike February 20 and 21 to demand that the government take action against continuing violence and threats against them. Last year, illegal groups murdered 14 teachers and threatened 900. Most recently, a teacher was assassinated on February 7 and at least 240 others have received death threats this year.

After its seventh futile meeting with the government, the National Strike Committee issued a statement which noted, "We insist on minimum guarantees [that] are necessary to allow initiating a negotiation, to stop attacks against social leaders, to stop abuses from the police and prevent adopting the set of neoliberal measures that have been questioned in the requests."

Teachers have struck and protested before, but the response of the right-wing government of Iván Duque has been minimal. In fact, members of his Centro Democrático party claim that the violence is wildly exaggerated or even contrived by the teachers, and they call for the destruction of the teachers' union, Fecode.

On February 20, some 800 teachers marched to the Labor Ministry in Bogotá, and on the 21st, in response to the nationwide strike and mobilizations involving over 340,000 educators the next day, 2,700 national police and 67,000 soldiers were deployed.

Uruguayan power plant workers hold 24-hour strike over unilateral contract changes

Workers for the National Administration of Power Plants and Electrical Transmissions (UTE), Uruguay's government-owned power company, struck on February 19 to protest management's unilateral decision to "alter the mechanisms of collective negotiation with the workers," according to the AUTE union.

The communiqué said that the mobilization was called "to defend collective negotiation and for respect for union organization" as well as to get management to consider "the proposals that the workers have for confronting the enormous changes foreseen in the commercial operation of UTE." Those changes are projected to affect more than 700 UTE workers.

Workers gathered at the UTE headquarters, the Palacio de la Luz in Montevideo at 11:00, where AUTE officials handed over their list of demands.

Trump executive order threatens federal workers

The White House quietly published a memo on February 20 issued by President Donald Trump that gives the secretary of the Department of Defense the power to abolish collective bargaining rights for some 750,000 civilian workers in the interests of "national security." The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 provides a provision that allows the president to issue an executive order to exclude collective bargaining rights in the interests of "national security requirements."

The memo, signed by Trump on January 20, and states in part:

"The national security interests of the United States require expedient and efficient decision-making.

"When new missions emerge or existing ones evolve, the Department of Defense requires maximum flexibility to respond to threats to carry out its mission of protecting the American people. This flexibility requires that military and civilian leadership manage their organizations to cultivate a lethal, agile force adaptive to new technologies and posture changes. Where collective bargaining is incompatible with these organizations' missions, the Department of Defense should not be forced to sacrifice its national security mission ..."

Montreal dockworkers vote to strike for third time

About 1,100 stevedores, heavy equipment operators, mechanics and ship's helpers organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have voted by over 99 percent to take strike action at the Port of Montreal on the St. Lawrence Seaway. The vote earlier this month was the third time in the past 14 months that the workers have voted overwhelmingly for strike action. Yet job action has yet to be undertaken as the union bows to employer interference and federal government foot-dragging in the strike authorization process.

The workers are demanding a new contract that addresses the oppressive working conditions on the docks. Current scheduling practices force workers to labour 19 days out of every 21. Due to the expansion in the volume of imports and exports at the port, the employer has insisted on a three-fold increase in the pace of work during weekend shifts. In addition, a vicious disciplinary regime has resulted, since the last contract was signed in 2013, in 30 firings and over 1,000 suspension days levied against members who have resisted the brutal working conditions.

After the first strike vote in December 2018, the Canada Industrial Relations Board convened to decide which, if any, essential products would be declared for the various cargoes regularly loaded and unloaded at the port. Federal regulations allow for any service necessary to "prevent imminent and serious danger to the health and safety of the public" to be designated as essential. Brazenly, the Maritime Employers Association has insisted that all tasks performed by the dock workers fall under an "essential" designation.

Union officials have pointed out that shipments of wine, furniture and a whole array of other consumer goods were hardly essential. Furthermore, products such as pharmaceuticals that can be considered important for public health can easily be unloaded at other Canadian ports. The employer, it was argued, simply refuses to absorb any extra costs that would ensue from additional overland transport. Although questions of "convenience" and "cost-savings" are not part of essential services deliberations, the Industrial Labour Relations Board has still not handed down a ruling more than 14 months since the initial strike vote was registered.

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