

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Guatemalans protest repression of unions

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No talks in Virginia shipyard strike

No negotiations have taken place in the week-long strike by United Steelworkers Local 8888 against Newport News Shipbuilding yard. The union estimates that 90 percent of its 9,200-strong work force is honoring the strike. The yard, which builds ships, submarines and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers for the Navy, continues production using the remaining 8,000 salaried employees not in the USWA bargaining unit.

Workers are bitter after not receiving a wage increase since 1993, while large profits have resulted in lucrative compensation for managers. The company's offer of yearly increases of 6, 3, and 4 percent does not even restore past concessions made by the union. The USWA is demanding a \$3.95 an hour across-the-board raise over a three-year contract.

The gap in negotiations is expected to result in a prolonged strike at a time when the Navy is engaged in supporting the US-NATO attack on Serbia. While Newport News is the only shipyard that builds nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, the Navy has two other shipyards that can carry out maintenance on carriers.

Intimidation in Oregon teachers' strike

Replacement teachers in the Fern Ridge, Oregon School District were escorted across picket lines on April 8, the second day of a strike by the district's 118 teachers. Pickets are blocked from the school by newly constructed wire fences while a security force equipped with video cameras carried out surveillance.

Teachers walked off the job after a year without a contract. The main issue is the refusal of the administration to incorporate "just cause" language in the contract to protect teachers from unfair dismissal. The problem has arisen since the Oregon legislature took away teachers' tenure in 1997. A striker pointed out, "In a small

district, one administrator can wield much more power." One parent accused Superintendent Patrick Burke of attempting to intimidate both teachers and parents at several meetings.

Another 269 teachers in Newberg, Oregon have voted to set a strike date for April 21 after 12 months of fruitless talks. The union and school district remain far apart on issues of pay, insurance and class preparation time.

Meanwhile, a bill has been introduced in the Oregon legislature that would allow school boards the right to limit pay increases. The proposal would set upper limits on salary and benefit increases.

Seattle teachers to carry out one-day strike

The Seattle Education Association in a near unanimous vote sanctioned a one-day strike on April 22 to protest the refusal of the state legislature to meet its demand for a 15 percent across-the-board pay raise. The action will involve 3,000 teachers at 100 Seattle-area schools and affect 47,600 students.

Teachers plan to hold a rally at Safeco Field, the newly built stadium complex for the Seattle Mariners baseball team, which received financing from the state's legislature. Teachers are also considering on-the-job slowdowns and refusing to work unpaid overtime. Many teachers support calling an indefinite strike if the legislature ends its current session without addressing pay issues.

The Washington state school system has been rocked by the refusal of the 67,000 Washington Education Association teachers to back down under pressure from the governor, legislature and their union leadership. Already several schools in districts around the state have either held one-day strikes or voted to carry them out. A statewide rally at the capital in Olympia is slated for April 17.

Guatemalans protest repression of unions

The Union of Labor and Popular Action has demanded that the government of President Alvaro Arzu stop repressing union activity in Guatemala. The call was in response to the arrest of 101 members of the Union of Workers in Guatemala. Arzu's government has effectively decided to criminalize all trade unions in Guatemala.

Popular Action leader Edwin Ortega declared that the current government policies are part of a strategy of wiping out the labor movement. He predicted that if the government continues with those policies it will risk igniting a social explosion.

Last Thursday a demonstration of hundreds of workers demanded that the government respect labor rights. They petitioned the courts to put a stop to the repression of labor leaders

Thursday's march is the first in a campaign to protest government policies and the abuse of workers by the courts, which turn a blind eye to employer violations and severely punish all labor transgressions.

One of the examples that the workers give is the arrest of 131 banana workers for fighting for better pay. Fifty percent of Guatemalan workers are in agriculture, principally in sugar, coffee and banana cultivation.

Native Chileans protest

On Thursday an organization of Chilean members of the Mapuche tribe broke off negotiations with the Frei government over land claims and announced it would mobilize in protest.

Fifty representatives, meeting in the southern city of Concepcion, decided not to continue the talks because the authorities have not given any indication that they will take any action on the demands. The Mapuches want the return of 200,000 hectares stolen from them. They also denounced police repression against them. Mapuches are the main native tribe in Chile, numbering about a million members.

Argentine teachers strike

Thousands of Argentine teachers struck last Tuesday. They are demanding the acceleration of raises recently approved by the Menem government after two years of protests. The government measure was supposed to take place on January 1, 1999, but has not been implemented.

Since 1997, teachers have been protesting and carrying out hunger strikes in a large tent in front of the Argentine congress. A 100-dollar monthly raise for the teachers was to be financed out of a tax on automobiles and

motorcycles. According to experts, the tax fund has only collected 10 million pesos so far, out of an expected 700 million. For that reason, the government is claiming that it must delay the pay raises. The minimum wage for Argentine teachers is 400 dollars a month.

Bolivian tin miners strike

A three-week-old Bolivian miners strike threatens to paralyze the processing plant of Vinto. The strike at the Huanuni mine, south of La Paz, has interrupted ore supplies to Vinto. Its reserves were expected to be exhausted by the end of last week. This will force the plant to extinguish its ovens, imposing technical and financial costs.

In 1998 Huanuni supplied half of Vinto's supplies of tin ore. The strikers are demanding cancellation of a layoff of 200 miners, announced last month. These miners had not accepted offers of early retirement from the government. The strikers are also demanding that the government cancel privatization plans for the mine and the processing plant.

About 30 hunger strikers entered the mine about 12 days ago. The hunger strikers are mainly women and children, relatives of the striking miners. Other strikers are blocking the transport of ore produced by the 500 scabs that are still working in the mine. There are reports of rising tension between the working miners, who accepted voluntary retirement, and the strikers.

Bolivians raise money to free teachers leader

The Bolivian Urban Teachers Federation is campaigning to raise 2500 dollars to bail out union leader Vilma Plata. Jose Luis Alvarez, another teachers leader, declared that the bail will not be raised out of union funds to show the Banzer government that there is popular support for the teachers. Plata has been under arrest since February 17 allegedly for blocking a scabbing teacher during a national teachers strike.

Bolivian teachers struck for 12 days beginning on February 5. They were forced back on February 17 when the Banzer government began replacing the striking teachers with retired and unemployed teachers.



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