

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Colombian oil workers protest

The largest union of oil workers has joined a general labor upsurge against the economic program of President Andres Pastrana. The workers occupied refineries in Cartagena and Barranca Bermeja, as well as pumping stations and administrative offices in various parts of the nation. This added 7,000 workers to the 300,000 teachers and 110,000 health workers already on strike. The workers are protesting the government's so-called labor reforms that threaten to increase unemployment. Colombia is undergoing historic rates of unemployment with 20 percent of the labor force officially jobless.

On May 6 the Colombian congress approved the reforms while strikes and protests by thousands were paralyzing Bogota. The legislature had to move the vote from its normal chambers because of the effects of tear gas being used against the protesters. Teachers and health workers ended their strike on May 7.

Protests in Argentina against education cuts

As part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, the Menem administration is slashing \$300 million from education, one-tenth of the national budget for public education. One-third of the cuts will come from spending for higher education. This means that the University of Buenos Aires, one of the most prestigious public institutions in Latin America, will have to shut its doors October 1.

Menem's decree is splitting the ruling Peronist Party (the Justicialista Party). It was issued without the signature of the Minister of Education Susana Decibe, who resigned in protest. Decibe also denounced Economics Minister Roque Fernandez, a disciple of Milton Friedman's free-market doctrine. Fernandez called for a presidential veto, in case the Congress rejects the cuts.

Before resigning, Decibe had received the support of all 24 Argentine provinces, demanding that the government carry out its constitutional obligation to provide education. Her replacement, Garcia Sola, has declared that he will carry out the cuts. He also denounced the nation's teachers, who promised to strike on Tuesday, May 11, and suggested that they not be paid for the days that they miss.

The measure resulted in the mobilization of thousands in Buenos Aires in support of professors and students occupying the university. On Friday, protests blocked the major streets of downtown Buenos Aires. In addition to the proposed cuts in education, another \$700 million will be cut from other parts of the government budget

Doctors strike in Dominican Republic

On May 5, doctors went on a 48-hour-strike in every public medical center in the country. The strike involved 3,000 Dominican MDs. They are demanding an increase in wages and better working conditions. The government threatened to dock the healthcare professionals for every day they are out. Health centers were kept open by military doctors.

The government of President Leonel Fernandez had initially authorized a 40 percent raise for doctors. However the legislature canceled the raise because it depended on the imposition of new taxes. The striking doctors also rejected the plan, insisting that the government already has the money.

US defense secretary demands cost-cutting at struck Virginia shipyard

Defense Secretary William Cohen declared that the Newport News Shipyard is inefficient and must cut costs or face far-reaching changes. The statement was made in a letter to congressmen last April as 9,000 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) union went on strike for higher wages against Newport News, which builds aircraft carriers, and submarines for the US Navy.

Newport News also signed an agreement with the Navy that commits itself to save \$360 million through 2003 by cutting labor and material costs. Union workers have already gone without a wage increase for six years. Newport News' offer of a 13 percent raise over a three-year contract was overwhelmingly rejected by the USW membership, which is seeking a \$3.95 across-the-board increase. The additional costs of the US-NATO attack on Serbia will only increase pressure from the Defense Department for cost cutting.

Tentative agreement in Twin Cities strike by sheetmetal workers

Union and construction company negotiators reached a tentative agreement May 5 after a five-day strike by 2,000 Twin Cities sheetmetal workers. The new agreement provides yearly wage increases of \$1.70, \$1.71 and \$1.75 per hour. The proposal also drops company demands for changes in scheduling and overtime pay which were rejected in two earlier contract proposals and sparked the week-long strike. Under the present contract journeymen sheetmetal workers earn \$24.70 an hour.

The strike did not encompass workers at downtown major construction projects in Minneapolis and St. Paul, which are covered by no-strike, no-lockout agreements. However, an undisclosed number of workers from these sites refused to report to work when the separate bargaining unit of sheetmetal workers went on strike.

Some 700 Twin Cities roofers who voted to strike on May 2 were ordered back to work May 5 by the Federal Mediation Services Board. Negotiations between union and company officials resumed the same day. Strikes by Twin Cities pipefitters and plumbers were averted after contracts were ratified by these bargaining units on May 3.

St. Paul brewery strike settled

Seventy members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) voted May 7 to accept concessions on work rules, vacations, overtime and health insurance ending a two-week strike against Minnesota Brewing Co. Details of the agreement were undisclosed. The contract is also to have included minimal wage increases. Originally workers rejected a three-year contract that proposed an immediate 2 percent increase followed in the second year by a freeze and then a 22-cent increase. IAM members had previously gone

five years without a wage increase. Minnesota Brewing, which was hit with a \$1.4 million loss in 1998, declared it was "pleased with the outcome."

Tennessee grocery supplier for Kroger stores struck

Warehouse and truck drivers for Galaxy Logistics went on strike over benefit and wages at the beginning of May. The company, which supplies grocery products to 81 Kroger stores in middle Tennessee, has hired replacement workers in an attempt to break the strike.

Two Connecticut nursing homes hit by strikes

Connecticut nursing homes in Bridgeport and Ansonia were struck by 250 members of Local 1199 of the New England Health Care Workers union May 4. Workers at the Grant Street Center in Bridgeport and the Mariner facility in Ansonia walked off the job to protest wage and staff schedule proposals in the newly proposed contract.

10,000 social service workers strike in British Columbia

Workers from four unions went on strike last week for wage parity and benefits across Canada's Pacific coast province. Wages in this sector are among the lowest in the country. The strike affects group homes, emergency shelters and other social services under provincial jurisdiction.

Six thousand of the strikers are Service Employees Union members. There are also at least 2,500 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the remainder are from the Hospital Employees Union and Health Sciences Association. While union leaders have attempted to downplay the impact of the strike, at least 140 agencies across the province have been affected.

The social workers have staged rotating strikes since March 8 of this year and most have been without a contract since March 1998. While details of the negotiations have not been published, it is reported that the New Democratic Party government of BC has limited their wage offer to as little as 10 percent over three years.



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