Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 October 2000

Health care workers strike in Brazil

Brazilian health workers are threatening to escalate a 20-day walkout to press their demands for a 28 percent pay increase, plus food and transportation vouchers. On October 5 union leader Antonio Agamenon said strike activity would increase if the workers' demands were not addressed. In addition to the health workers, protests continue by education workers demanding better wages and promotion rules. City street cleaners are also out on strike.

Bolivian government reaches agreement with striking teachers

The government of Hugo Banzer reached an agreement with urban teachers and protesting coca farmers on October 6. The agreement includes a $50 bonus to teachers, and an agreement to respect areas of “traditional coca cultivation” (the consumption of coca leaves is a legal custom in Bolivia). The agreement followed three weeks of strikes and mass protests throughout the country, which left 10 people dead and 128 wounded.

The agreement with urban teachers is similar to one reached with their rural counterparts two days before. If teachers and farmers ratify the agreement, highway blockades will be lifted and teachers will return to work.

Honduran governments threatens strikers with mass sackings

On October 3, the Honduran government threatened to fire 200,000 workers involved in an indefinite strike that began October 3. The strikers are members of the Federation of Workers, the Federation of Labor and the Trade Union Federation of National Workers. The unions are demanding a monthly raise of $67 for all workers who earn less than $195 a month. The Honduran minimum wage is $100 a month. Unemployment is 40 percent and 80 percent of the population lives in poverty.

March for jobs in Paraguay

More than 7,000 workers marched through downtown Asuncion on October 5 to demand that the government of Luis Gonzales Macchi adopt emergency measures to reduce unemployment. The workers belong to the National Federation of Workers (CNT). The CNT disputes the official government claim that 400,000 workers are unemployed, and says the actual figure is closer to one million. Paraguay's has a working age population of 4 million. CNT leaders also point out that some 400 manufacturing firms have shut their doors since 1995. The unions are demanding that 200 of these be reopened as a first step to providing jobs.

According to Eduardo Ojeda, General Secretary of the CNT, poverty is increasing across Paraguay. He denounced the government's inactivity and said 190,000 public employees faced a payless payday next month, due to lack of funds.

Argentinean truckers end protests

A strike by thousands of truck drivers in Argentina has been called off, after oil companies agreed to temporarily lower fuel prices. The action caused warnings of food shortages if the blockades continued. Under an agreement reached with the oil companies, diesel prices will be cut for two months, while the government tries to find a more permanent solution to some of the truckers' demands.

Strikes by Los Angeles county workers intensify

Rolling strikes spread to two area hospitals as the contract struggle by 47,000 Los Angeles County employees continues. Service Employees International Union Local 660 has said it would call an indefinite general strike by all county workers if no agreement is reached by Wednesday, October 11. Almost 10 million county residents rely on public services administered by these workers.

The rolling strikes, which began October 2, have disrupted services at libraries, clerk's offices, public works, beaches, welfare offices and other government operations. Patients, including some in wheelchairs,

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joined pickets at one county hospital to express their support. On Tuesday, October 10 area clinics along with the giant County-USC Medical Center are scheduled to join the rolling strike.

Strikers are bitter over the lack of any raises over the last four years and are demanding a 15.5 percent wage increase. County negotiators are offering 9 percent. Some 60 percent of the workers make less than $32,000 a year. The county also wants to impose co-payments for medical care. Hospital workers want an end to staffing shortages that have forced them to work longer hours and have endangered patient care. County workers are also demanding free day care provisions.

No talks between county officials and SEIU Local 660 have taken place since September 29. The county is insisting it cannot negotiate while employees conduct what they call an illegal strike. A county spokesperson announced over the weekend that they would seek a temporary restraining order on the basis that the strike is a threat to public health and safety.

Raytheon contract ratified bringing end to Massachusetts strike

Striking Raytheon workers at several Massachusetts facilities have ratified the defense contractor's most recent proposal by a 1,702-275 margin, bringing to an end their month-long walkout.

The four-year pact called for yearly wage increases of 3 percent, 4 percent, 3 percent and a final 4 percent, which appears to be just less than the company's earlier offer of 14.7 percent. The agreement included the previously proposed $1,500 bonus. Monthly pension and health care benefits were increased by an undisclosed amount.

Officials of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1505 claim the company agreed to keep current missile- and radar-related assembly jobs in the state for the duration of the contract. Job security was a major issue given the sharp decline in Local 660's membership from 10,000 to under 3,000 over the past 10 years.

Florida orchestra strikes for higher wages

Orchestra musicians for the Florida Philharmonic walked out October 5 canceling the opening of the fall concert series. The union representing orchestra members is calling for a 32 percent pay raise to give the musicians parity with other professional orchestras in the United States. Industry statistics reveal that the average weekly pay of 48 selected orchestras is $1,118, well above the $847 members of the Florida Philharmonic receive.

The orchestra's management is offering just 5 percent, saying this is all they can afford given the organization's $10 million annual budget and $4 million endowment. Strikers manned the picket lines with signs saying, “It's time to pay the pipers” and “World-class orchestra, second-class wages.”

Independent truckers threaten to strike over fuel costs

On October 4 representatives of independent truckers stormed out of a meeting with the Ontario Trucking Association (OTA) because the association has refused to address the owner-operators complaints about high fuel prices and low mileage rates. Last month, after the truckers threatened to blockade Ontario's oil refineries and major highways if no relief was given, Ontario Economic Minister Al Palladini assured the truckers that fuel charges would be voluntarily passed down from the companies that use their services.

The National Truckers Association, which represents about 1,700 independent truckers, most of whom are in Ontario, backed the surcharge plan and urged truckers to return to work while the agreement was worked out. However, at the recent meeting where truckers expected to hear what percentage of the surcharge they would receive to defray the impact of higher fuel costs, the OTA acknowledged that it had not met with the transport companies. In retaliation truckers have vowed to return to their proposed strike action.

Independent truckers' livelihoods are being decimated as fuel costs have risen 75 percent since July of last year. Meanwhile both the federal Liberal government and the Ontario Tory government continue to place exorbitant taxes on fuel, while reducing the tax burden on big business and the wealthy.

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