

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 May 2002

Brazilian education workers on strike

Members of the State Union of Teaching Professionals (SEPE) decided at a May 10 rally to continue their 64-day strike against the Rio de Janeiro state government. The teachers are demanding that their base pay be raised in four installments rather than the thirteen proposed by Governor Benedita de Silva of the Workers Party (PT). Their base wage is to increase from 571 reales (about US\$220) to 1,067 reales (US\$400). The striking teachers are planning a series of mobilizations this week to press their demands.

Peruvian government confronts strike threat

The embattled regime of Alejandro Toledo is facing a national strike set for May 14. Civic organizations, political parties and regional groups are organizing the strike to demand that the government address the social and economic crisis afflicting Peru. Currently the country is in the grips of a long recession. In an attempt to contain a wave of popular protest to demand jobs, Toledo recently announced his government would suspend negotiations with private electrical utilities for 30 days. He also cancelled a trip to Germany that was to take place this week. The protesters have blocked the Pan American Highway.

Mexican teachers strike

Educators at the 17 campuses of the College of Science and Technology of Sonora State (CECYTES) went on a strike of indefinite duration May 9 to protest the administration's repudiation of agreements on support for rural education and on the reduction of hours by teachers.

Dissident teachers in the state of Guanajuato joined a national caravan of teachers that originated in Michoacan, and reached Salamanca, Guanajuato on May 9. The caravan is on its way to Mexico City to join teachers from Morelos, Chiapas, Oaxaca, the State of Mexico and the Federal District to protest the education policies of the Vicente Fox government. The teachers are part of a dissident movement against the official union bureaucracy. They are demanding a "decent existence" for teachers and calling attention to Fox's plan to privatize education and expel SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo from the union.

Mexican workers occupy Labor Secretariat

About 100 fertilizer workers, employed by Fertinal Company, took over the offices of the Mexican Labor Secretariat for five hours on May 8. The workers have been on strike since last November, demanding an 11 percent wage increase.

Fertinal, which has refused to budge on the wage issue, has offered six percent. It employs 1,200 workers and produces 1,200 tons of fertilizer at its plant in Michoacan State. The Mexican government owns 47 percent of the stock in Fertinal.

Chilean civil registry workers strike

Over 2,600 public employees at Chile's Civil Registry have been on strike since May 6 to demand a 25 percent wage increase. The Civil Registry issues passports, wedding licenses, and birth and death certificates.

Strike leaders report that the workers are among the lowest paid in the country. Sixty-four percent of them receive wages below 230 thousand pesos (US\$350) a month. The government of President Lagos is refusing to negotiate with the workers as long as the strike continues.

United ground workers ratify contract

United Airlines' 23,000 ground workers voted to accept the contract negotiated by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) last month. The margin of ratification was not disclosed.

The agreement includes a 13 percent retroactive pay raise plus an immediate 7 percent pay hike. Ramp workers will see their wages go to \$23.49 once the contract is signed this week and rise to \$25.16 when the contract expires in 2004. Customer service agents will see their wages rise to \$24.59 per hour at the conclusion of the contract signing.

IAM President Randy Canale declared, "These IAM members can now move beyond the years of sacrifice that marked their employment at United during the past eight years."

In reality, the IAM will now sit down with unions representing the pilots, flight attendants and mechanics to discuss a new round of concessions to bail out United, which is losing \$4 million to \$5 million a day.

United CEO Jack Creighton sounded a corporatist note upon the acceptance of the contract by ground workers, commenting, "Only through the cooperative efforts of all of us at United can we return to our rightful place as the leader in the airline industry."

Las Vegas casino workers to take strike vote

A strike vote for 53,000 members of the Culinary Union who work at casinos in Las Vegas will be held May 16. The strike vote breaks with the pattern of the past two decades in which negotiations dragged on past strike deadlines without so much as a strike vote.

The *Wall Street Journal* led their report remarking that in the past "casinos and their biggest labor union have had a relationship so cozy that top union and casino officials golfed together and worked out labor contracts over meals." Behind the decision of the union bureaucracy to call a strike vote is growing anger of the rank-and-file workers over revelations of lucrative salaries handed out to executives. The casino MGM Mirage doled out \$5.2 million in bonuses to its executives. Meanwhile workers have suffered post-September 11 job cuts of 8,000 union members of which some 3,000 still remain unemployed. An even greater number of workers had their hours reduced.

Workers are especially angered that while casino bosses have cut jobs, they are trying to increase workloads on housekeepers. Union negotiators are seeking to resolve this issue by not demanding a wage increase.

But health-care issues could prove to be the most explosive. A health-care fund jointly administered by the union and the casinos is about to run out of money. In the past, the union agreed to surrender \$172 million back to the casinos in contributions to the fund. To remain solvent, the bureaucracy is seeking \$70 million in the next year for the fund. This translates into an increased employer contribution of 70 cents, bringing the total to \$2.92 per hour worked by each union member. The casinos, however, want workers to contribute to this amount. The present contract is due to expire May 31.

New talks in Hershey strike

Union and company negotiators will resume talks May 16 for the first time since 2,800 chocolate workers walked off the job at two Hershey Foods Corporation plants in Pennsylvania April 26. Strikers have opposed Hershey's attempt to double employee contributions to the company's health-care plan from 6 percent to 12 percent.

Company CEO Rick Lenny, who received a \$1.6 million salary, has launched a media barrage that seeks to portray the strikers as greedy for not wanting to accept similar contract provisions pressed upon other Hershey employees. Strikers are bitter about the anti-union ads and the fact the company has hired a security firm for the course of the strike.

With warmer weather coming on, strikers are threatening to picket Hersheypark, owned by Hershey Entertainment and Resort Company, a major tourist attraction and promotion for the candy maker.

Police arrest Massachusetts human service workers at protest

Boston Police arrested 11 members of the Service Employees International Union Local 509 May 9 for blocking traffic in front of the State House in Boston. Some 50 members of the union massed across Beacon Street at noon to shut down traffic in order to call attention to low wages paid to the state's 30,000 human service workers. Those arrested will face misdemeanor charges. SEIU officials are calling for a "living wage" of \$11.50 an hour plus health benefits for state workers. Should the state refuse to provide benefits, the union says it will insist on \$12.50 an hour.

Agreement in East Cleveland teachers strike

An agreement was reached by the East Cleveland school district and the union representing 461 striking teachers, bringing a bitter two-week strike to a close. The three-year proposal called for pay increases of 3 percent, 2 percent and 3 percent. Teachers also fended off an attempt by the district to increase health-care costs and lengthen the working day. An additional proposal providing teachers with up to two years of parental leave was granted.

Besides the attack on health-care benefits and the working day, the school district attempted to hold wage increases at 2 percent. School superintendent Elvin Jones deeply angered teachers and their supporters with provocative statements threatening to replace schoolteachers and dock their pay, along with his hiring of replacement teachers during the course of the strike. At a highly charged school board meeting, board members had to be protected by police as they left.

Construction workers strike in Minneapolis-St. Paul

A federal mediator is being called in to broker talks between unions representing Minneapolis and St. Paul pipefitters and the Minnesota Mechanical Contractors Association. Some 2,500 pipefitters from locals 455 and 539 voted to strike last week after the two sides could not reach an agreement. While details are not known, the main issue proving to be troublesome is health care. "It's getting to be a huge, phenomenal issue," said pipefitters' business agent Charley Fritze.

Negotiations last week between the Twin City Roofing Contractor Association and union negotiators for Roofers Local 39 broke off May 9 without an agreement as 1,000 roofers concluded their first week on strike. Sheet Metal Workers Local 10 voted to reject a contract offer but did not vote to take immediate strike action. Unions for plumbers in both Minneapolis and St. Paul concluded agreements with employer groups.

Poultry company agrees to \$10 million fine

Perdue Farms, one of the United States' larger poultry processors, reached an agreement with the US Labor Department to pay a \$10 million fine for not paying its 25,000 workers clothes-changing time on the job. The settlement will average about \$500 a year for up to two years covering past and present workers.

The government determined that workers spend eight minutes a day putting on and taking off gear required for working in poultry plants. The figure is less than the half-hour a day changing time that the Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance claims is typical.

At the same time as the agreement with Perdue was announced, the Labor Department announced a suit against Tyson Foods, the nation's largest poultry producer, over the clothes-changing issue. Tyson has adamantly opposed reaching an agreement with the federal government.

Labor Department head Elaine Chao called the settlement with Perdue

"a major victory for workers." In reality, the campaign appears to have more to do with providing a level playing field for the 174 poultry processing plants in the United States that employ about 250,000 workers.

Eugene Scalia, the Labor Department's lead lawyer who is supposedly leading the fight against the poultry giants, worked for years on behalf of corporations fighting against the implementation of repetitive stress rules, a much more serious issue. Repetitive stress leads to crippling injuries to workers in many industries. Scalia is the son of right-wing Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

CBC lockout continues

In Quebec and Moncton, New Brunswick more than 1,200 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation journalists, researchers, production assistants and other employees have been locked out since March 23, affecting the national broadcaster's radio and television programming in both English and French. The main issue is wage parity with their co-employees in other parts of the country. Also at issue is the high number of temporary employees at the Quebec site—who work for the broadcaster for years without medical or vacation benefits.

The lockout took place after the workers, organized by the Syndicat des Communications de Radio-Canada, staged a one-day strike. CBC workers in other parts of the country are represented by different unions, which do not support each other's struggles. On May 4, a locked-out CBC worker was charged with disturbing the peace after being hauled away for blocking the view of a camera operated by a fellow CBC employee.

BC doctors protest Liberal attacks

Nearly 8,000 doctors in British Columbia are engaged in a labor dispute with the provincial Liberal government. In the coming weeks, specialists will cease to admit new patients, perform elective surgery, and accept on-call duty. For the British Columbia Medical Association (BCMA), representing the doctors, the main issue is the province's Medical Services Arbitration Act, passed March 7. The legislation removes binding third party arbitration as a possibility for future negotiations between the province and the doctors, and annuls the results of recent binding arbitration. The BC Liberal government has also announced that a fee settlement will simply be imposed upon the doctors.

The Liberals are engaged in a ferocious attack on the living and working conditions of the working class. Towards the end of April, they announced that 8,000 health-care jobs will be cut, three hospitals will be closed while service is reduced at many others, and some health-care services will be privatized.

For its part, the BCMA has indicated it is willing to collaborate with the privatization of public services. In her submission to the Romanow commission on public health care, Dr. Heidi Oetter, the BCMA's president, said: "It is apparent that Medicare can no longer be all things to all people and tough choices regarding coverage will have to be made.... As well, the introduction of the private sector to deliver some services that are still funded by the public purse can relieve the strain in health care and need[s] to be considered. Now is the time to make the necessary definitive and tough choices."



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