

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 May 2002

Municipal workers rally in Paraguay

Members of the Asuncion Municipal Workers Union (SITRAMA) rallied on the steps of the civic center to demand a 20 percent wage increase. SITRAMA officials declared the wage increase urgent, given Paraguay's economic crisis. Mayor Enrique Riera's office declared that the city's total payroll made any increase impossible. At the rally workers denounced the mayor, who promised last year to improve working conditions, and exposed Riera for financing a wage increase for himself and his cabinet.

Panamanian workers protest high telephone rates, low retirement benefits

Workers throughout Panama are set to mobilize against high telephone bills. The trade union leadership is also polling members on taking measures such as a general strike. Government officials pleaded with the workers not to walk out, given the country's economic emergency. Mariano Mena, head of the Central Labor Confederation, charged the government with acting irresponsibly in not voting against the increase. The government is a stockholder in the private telephone company.

Retirees are also demanding that Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso carry out the pension increase that her government promised last year. The Independent Retirees and Pensioners association (JPI) gave Moscoso until May 27 to respond before they would take to the streets.

JPI leader Eladio Fernandez demanded retirees be paid the \$25 a month they are still owed and that the Moscoso administration increase the pension fund by \$120 million. He charged the government had raided the social security system in the past and now had to return the funds. Many pensioners are living under precarious conditions, unable to withstand increases in the costs of transportation, utilities, medicine and basic foodstuffs.

Striking banana workers attacked in Ecuador

Human Rights Watch issued an alert on the violent repression of striking banana workers in Ecuador. According to the alert, the worst attacks occurred at the Los Alamos plantation in Southwest Ecuador, where 10 workers were shot on May 16. Between 200 and 400 masked men invaded the plantation, beat workers with rifle butts and shot the workers, one of whom had to have one leg amputated. Later that day, the gunmen—in the presence of police—ordered 1,200 striking workers off the plantation.

Banana workers have been trying to unionize and they launched their strike in response to employers' attacks on union militants. The Ecuadorian Labor Ministry gave legal status to three unions but has made feeble efforts to enforce the workers' rights. In March, 129 union supporters were fired from Los Alamos, sparking the current strike.

Alvaro Noboa, a millionaire businessman and owner of Los Alamos, is a leading presidential contender in the October 2002 elections. In addition to banana plantations, he owns plants that process coffee, flour, fish and shrimp. In March 2002 he founded the Institutional Renewal Party National Action (PRIAN) to run in the elections.

Night students continue their struggle in Colombia

Eight schools that educate 23,000 working class students are being occupied in a protest that began nearly two weeks ago in Colombia. The striking students are defending their right to a decent education, saying that full-time day teachers who are being forced to teach longer hours are

too tired to teach effectively in the evening.

The students are demanding the government hire instructors specifically to teach night school. Public education authorities claim it is more cost-effective to have teachers working extra hours given the high dropout rate among night students. On average, only 650 students out of every 1,000 complete each course.

IMF mission arrives in Uruguay

On May 24 an International Monetary Fund mission arrived in Uruguay to negotiate a loan as workers staged a 12-hour general strike and other protests. The protesters are demanding the government rescind a series of austerity measures that would tax workers' wages and pensions. The economic crisis in neighboring Argentina has had a serious impact on Uruguay, which has seen a flight of capital and increases in the fiscal deficit.

The strike—from noon to midnight—had its greatest impact on banking, transportation, public schools, health services and public utilities. Workers marched on downtown Montevideo and outside the legislature. That night workers banged pots across the street from the president's residence. On May 29 health care workers are expected to carry out a nine-hour strike and march on the health ministry.

Chilean teachers strike

On May 24, teachers went on a two-hour strike in Chile. Classes ended earlier and teachers assembled to discuss future activities in their campaign for higher wages. About 80,000 teachers participated, 80 percent of the total. Following the strike, teachers in Santiago rallied outside the offices of the education ministry.

Bolivian airport workers paralyze flights

Members of the Union of Airport Administration and Auxiliary Service Workers (ASANA) stopped all activity at 34 Bolivian airports on May 24, causing national and international airlines to lose about a million dollars. The workers returned to work late that evening after signing an agreement with the government.

ASANA organized the strike to demand that an airport contractor, Bolivian Airport Services (SABSA), pay the \$1.2 million it owes the state. The union also demanded that airport workers be incorporated into the Bolivian Civil Service and that their wages be adjusted accordingly. The workers threatened to intensify their protest if they get no response from SABSA.

Transportation Vice Minister Robert Becerra denounced the job action, calling it illegal and irresponsible. He also threatened to bring criminal charges against the ASANA leaders, which could result in four-year prison terms.

Sao Paulo subways workers vote to strike

Sao Paulo rail workers voted to strike May 28 after rejecting management's 6.43 percent wage offer. The union is holding out for a 9 percent cost-of-living increase and a 4 percent productivity increase.

Protests in Argentina

General strike call

The Argentine Workers Central (CTA) called for a general strike on May 29. The strikers plan a national mobilization that will include blocking highways and rallies across the nation. The strike has been called to protest hunger and the marginalization of large segments of the

population caused by the economic crisis.

CTA leader Victor Genaro predicted that the strike will occur in 1,000 cities and will show “a country that is rebelling against social exclusion.” He claimed that the union was organizing the May 29 popular rebellion to provide “another road against the politics of hunger that the present economic model wants to impose on us.” Supporting the strike are the Argentine University Federation (FUA), an organization of university students, the United Syndicate of Education Workers (SUTEBA) and organizations of the unemployed.

National strike fizzles

On May 22, a 12-hour strike called by the dissident Moyano wing of the General Labor Confederation (CGT) had very little participation. Moyano spoke at a rally in the Plaza de Mayo, calling for nationalist policies to break Argentina’s dependency on the IMF. He said, “We cannot go around worm-like, begging for a few dollars that we are not going to get, while the nation’s social crisis gets worse.” He vowed to launch an aggressive campaign for improved wages.

Wages are being drastically cut, more than 20 percent since last year, with an equal cut predicted this year. Prices for the basic worker’s breadbasket have increased 70 percent since the government ended one-to-one convertibility between the peso and the US dollar.

Unemployed protest

On May 22, unemployed workers mobilized across the country, blocking highways in Cordoba, Neuquen, Tucuman, Rosario, Tucuman and Mar del Plata. The unemployed rallied in Buenos Aires’ Congress Square. They denounced government corruption, including cases where legislators have diverted funds for the unemployed into their own pockets. The marchers also demanded food for school meal programs and called for a break with the IMF.

Chicago Pepsi drivers strike

About 300 Teamsters drivers at PepsiAmerica’s Chicago-based bottling facility went on strike May 19 over wages and benefit issues. The company has flown in management personnel as replacement workers and hired security guards to monitor picket lines.

In a 100-81 vote, members of Teamsters Local 744 rejected the proposed five-year contract that called for workers to make a first-time 15 percent contribution to health care costs. Workers also opposed the company’s restructuring of drivers’ responsibilities. Previously, drivers were responsible for selling products to retailers. Under the new agreement, that policy will end as the company moves to pre-sell its products to vendors, and with its termination, drivers will lose commissions for making sales. The rejection represented the second time that workers have voted down a tentative agreement from the number two bottler for the soft drink maker PepsiCo Incorporated.

Company and union officials plan on meeting this week to discuss a new proposal. PepsiAmerica’s warehouse and production workers ratified their contract 102-84. While inside workers were also required to pay the 15 percent contribution to health care, they received higher wage increases than the 30 cents offered to drivers.

Hotel workers strike in San Francisco

Hundreds of room cleaners, house persons, front desk clerks, cooks, servers, and bell persons walked off the job May 24 at the Marriott Courtyard on Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. The strike is over management’s refusal to agree to a fair contract during seven months of negotiations. Marriott management insists that service workers continue to clean 16 rooms a day instead of the 14 required at other unionized hotels on Fisherman’s Wharf. This has led to increased injuries and no time for lunch breaks.

The workers, who are members of the Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees Union Local 2, are also demanding wage increases to bring them up to the same level as other workers in the area. The workers have not had a wage increase since 1998, even though the cost of living in the

San Francisco Bay Area is among the highest in the country.

Hotel workers at Florida Disney World reject contract for second time

Workers at two Walt Disney World hotels in Florida rejected a second contract negotiated by the Teamsters union and hotel management. The leadership of the Teamsters said it would prepare for a strike while a hotel spokesperson threatened the Tishman Hotel Corporation, which owns the two properties, would implement the contracts unilaterally.

Teamsters members make up 400 of 2,000 employees at the Swan and Dolphin hotels, including housekeepers, laundry workers, seamstresses and public area attendants. Union negotiators had been seeking a guaranteed 40-hour workweek and job assignments based on seniority. The previous contract was rejected last March.

Tentative agreements at some Las Vegas casinos

Union negotiators representing Las Vegas casino workers reached agreements last week with three major gambling houses. Park Place Entertainment, Tropicana hotel and Harrah’s Las Vegas, employing some 16,500 maids, bellmen, cocktail waitresses and food service workers, agreed to five-year contracts. Union officials granted the Rio hotel-casino a contract extension.

While complete details are not available, the Culinary Workers Union has estimated that average increases will amount to \$3.25 in wages and benefits. All three contracts retain fully paid health care provisions, something casinos had wanted to reverse.

Contracts covering another 30,000 union workers at 30 facilities are set to expire May 31. In some cases casinos, like the MGM Mirage, have indicated they will consent to agreements similar to those reached last week.

Minnesota state officials re-sign contracts with state workers

Labor negotiators for the state of Minnesota re-signed contracts with unions representing 23,000 state workers May 20 in an attempt to circumvent the state legislature’s failure to ratify the agreements. Democrats and Republicans deadlocked over the inclusion of insurance benefits for domestic partners of gay and lesbian employees.

Members of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees originally approved the contracts back in November of 2001 and the agreement’s provisions took effect in December. But under the Public Employee Labor Relations Act the legislature must approve the contracts. In March, the Democratic-controlled Senate passed a bill that accepted the contract. But the Republican-controlled House agreed to the pact minus the insurance provisions for gay and lesbian couples.

When the legislature adjourned last week without resolving the issue, the administration of Governor Jesse Ventura stepped in to try to salvage the contracts by resigning them. The effect was to retain insurance benefits, including those for gay and lesbian couples. Because law requires 30 days before any contract can take effect, workers’ wages will revert to those of the old contract for one month before the new increases kick in again. The re-signed contacts must now be ratified by the 2003 state legislature.

The strike of Minnesota state workers in 2001 continues to provoke controversy in ruling circles. In the run-up to the strike, Ventura said talk of a strike on the part of workers was unpatriotic in a time of war. On the strike’s first day he went to New York and, using the rubble of the World Trade Center as a backdrop, attacked strikers.

When workers surprised state officials by demonstrating firm solidarity in the biggest strike in state history, sections of the capitalist press sharply attacked Ventura’s confrontational tactic and looked to the labor bureaucracy to sell out the strike.

The inclusion of insurance benefits for gay and lesbian couples, while it only involved 85 cases, provoked sharp opposition, not only from the Religious Right but also from big business, which fears it might create a

precedent for extension of the benefit to private-sector workers.

Federal agency charges Allstate with intimidation

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) accused Allstate Insurance Company last week of illegally intimidating 650 life insurance agents when it transformed them into independent contractors under a plan aimed at cutting health and pension costs. When Allstate changed the status of the agents in 2000 and 2001, it forced them to sign a release that barred them from suing the company for any past discrimination. The EEOC determined that Allstate's actions amounted to "unlawful interference, coercion and intimidation."

The EEOC action combines with a suit originally filed by former Allstate agents who charge the maneuver was part of a plan to save the insurance company \$325 million a year. They point out that Allstate's offer of a 2 percent increase in commissions and a one-time \$5,000 bonus did not compensate them for the benefits they lost under the deal. Last December, the EEOC sued Allstate for similar treatment of its 6,500 agents who sold auto, home and life insurance policies.

Radio-Canada lockout ends

Fourteen hundred workers at Radio-Canada in Quebec and Moncton began to return to work May 25, ending a two-month lockout, which followed a one-day strike. On May 22 workers voted in favor of a tentative contract with the broadcaster, by a margin of 694 to 302. The previous week—in 502 to 500 vote—workers rejected a proposed contract in defiance of the recommendations of the union's negotiating team.

The broadcaster has agreed to create 152 permanent positions, including 132 earmarked for present contract workers. One of the major issues in the dispute had been Radio-Canada's heavy reliance on temporary workers. The new contract includes wage increases of 3 percent immediately, 1.5 percent at the start of the new year, and 2.5 percent the following year.

Toronto hotel workers to hold strike vote

Workers at three Toronto hotels will hold a strike authorization vote, May 27 through 29. The workers, who number over 1,600 and include service, maintenance and kitchen staff, are represented by Local 75 of the Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), and work at Toronto's Delta Chelsea, Sheraton Centre, and Toronto Hilton hotels.

Their demands include wage improvements, better job security and retirement benefits and an employer-subsidized public transit pass. Retirement contributions by employers are dismally low. The hotels pay \$731 a year in retirement benefits, after what for many workers will have been a lifetime in the hotel industry.

In the words of one room attendant at Toronto's Sheraton Centre, "Not only do we deserve a fair settlement but we need one. We are living from paycheck to paycheck, always one month behind on our rent. Always hoping we can scrape up enough money to get a token to get us to work. What you have proposed today is totally unacceptable."

BC doctors intensify job action

Against the recommendation of the British Columbia Medical Association, doctors and surgeons in Vernon, Kamloops, Kelowna and Penticton are refusing to perform emergency treatments. One open emergency room is being rotated through the four cities in British Columbia's southern interior.

The main issue is the BC Liberal government's legislation discarding a settlement reached with the doctors under the previous New Democratic Party government. The Liberals have also announced the closure of three hospitals, that they will lay off some 8,000 workers, and that some health care services will be privatized.

The British Columbia Medical Association is not a formal union—not all BC doctors are members and none are bound to comply with the various agreements it negotiates. In recent days, specialists have complained that the BCMA is not taking their interests into account.



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