

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 May 2003

Guatemalan teachers protest

On May 14 more than 3,000 teachers and their supporters rallied in Guatemala City to protest government attacks on education and other issues. The teachers oppose as unconstitutional a new law that supposedly gives control of schools to parents. In reality the law is designed to undermine working conditions and punish teachers for having gone on a 50-day strike last February.

Public employee strike in Chile

The National Association of Government Employees (ANEF) carried out a 24-hour-strike on May 13 to protest new labor legislation that would replace wage increases tied to seniority with a merit system controlled by management. The ANEF, which represents 65,000 workers in Chile, said the strike "paralyzed" the country.

Electric utility workers on strike in Costa Rica

On May 12, more than 6,000 employees of the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) marched in the capital city of San Jose and rallied at the Central Bank. The employees demanded that the Central Bank approve a \$97 million bond issue to prevent ICE from laying off 3,000 workers.

Central Bank President Francisco de Paula refused to approve the loans for the electric utility, saying his responsibility was ensuring "financial stability." Government officials claimed there is no money to meet the workers' demands and indicated they are negotiating with international monetary agencies for a \$36 million loan.

Teachers strike in Ecuador

Public school teachers, members of the National Educators' Union (UNE), went on strike on May 14 to demand increases in school funding. The UNE has 12,000 members. Despite efforts by Education Minister Rosa Torres to forestall a strike with claims that she was in favor of a bigger educational budget, the teachers decided to go on with the walkout. UNE President Ernesto Castillo declared that the strike "resulted from having exhausted our patience during three months of negotiations with school authorities."

Peruvian teachers on strike

Peru's teachers, members of the Unitary Syndicate of Peruvian Education Workers (SUTEP), went on strike on May 12 demanding wage increases after rejecting a government offer of a \$21.50 per month raise. President

Alejandro Toledo had promised to double teacher's pay during his term. SUTEP officials calculate that for the promise to be fulfilled, the monthly raise should be \$37.30. On the first day of the strike, teachers mobilized throughout Peru. In Lima thousands rallied at the legislature and petitioned for their wage demands.

Mexican dissident teachers union denounces wage offer

A 7.9 percent wage increase does not help teachers' buying power, warned the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), a powerful dissident union in Mexico. The increase was negotiated between the government of Vicente Fox and the official National Syndicate of Education Workers (SNTE).

The CNTE declared that teachers' demands are routinely ignored. They have pressed for substantial wage increases, better social security, a more democratic union and punishment for those responsible for the disappearance and assassination of many dissident teachers.

President Fox has declared that the CNTE does not represent the interests of Mexican teachers, preferring instead to deal with the SNTE, a union that is widely acknowledged to be corrupt.

The CNTE is threatening to call a national teachers strike. Already teachers in Guerrero and Michoacan states are on strike. In Mexico City, CNTE teachers are to march on the Institute of Social Security on May 20.

Job security dominates week-old Stanley strike in Connecticut

Over 400 workers at worldwide toolmaker Stanley Works in the Connecticut towns of Farmington and New Britain concluded their first week on strike with no new negotiations scheduled. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 1249 said that Stanley declined to make a firm commitment to retain the 120 jobs at the company's Access Technologies division in Farmington.

Stanley management attempted to counter the union's statement by claiming it had offered to move the Farmington operations to New Britain and invest between one and two million dollars to upgrade the facility. When asked if they would put this offer on the table, company officials declined to commit themselves.

In April, after first quarter net earnings dropped by 61

percent, Stanley announced a restructuring plan that included the closure of five warehouses and four plants and the layoff of 1,000 workers. In the past the company has outsourced jobs to Mexico, Thailand and China. The company also plans to buy back \$200 million in stock.

Landlord evicts union for anti-war stance

The National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees District 1199 was evicted from its offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico as a result of a complaint by its landlord that charged the union breached “the terms of its lease by holding an anti-war demonstration.” Carroll Ventures Inc. charged that the union “created a nuisance and interrupted other tenants’ quiet enjoyment of the premises.”

“It’s kind of scary,” said 1199 director Eleanor Chavez. “What’s happening in this country? We talk about going to war with Iraq to defend freedom. Well, how do you define freedom?”

In actuality, the union’s anti-war demonstration took place at another location. A meeting was held in the facility’s clubhouse later in the evening after offices had closed. Police, who were called to the union’s headquarters, determined the meeting did not constitute a disturbance.

Telephone installers continue strike

Workers at Sprint Corporation’s local telephone division in Clinton, New Jersey are entering their fourth week on strike. Some 90 workers who do installation and repair work on local phone lines refuse to accept the company’s demand for a reduction in short-term disability pay.

Sprint wants to cap disability pay at 26 weeks of full pay and 26 weeks at half pay. The present level is a maximum of 52 weeks at full compensation. The lower injury pay has already been implemented at other Sprint locations. The company is continuing operations during the New Jersey walkout with about 50 replacement workers.

One-day strike closes Rhode Island schools

The superintendent of Pawtucket, Rhode Island schools canceled classes May 13 after 98 food service workers declared they would hold a one-day strike and district teachers said they would honor picket lines. Workers announced their intention to strike if last-minute negotiations between the Marriott’s food service operations—Sodexo—and Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 217 fail to result in a contract.

Food service workers are presently paid as little as \$8.33 an hour, which is below what nearby school districts are paying workers in comparable positions. Workers want higher wages and reductions in their share of health insurance costs.

BC health care workers reject concessions

British Columbia’s 46,000 hospital support workers have rejected a concession-laden tentative agreement reached by

their unions and the Liberal provincial government in British Columbia. The rejected agreement, negotiated by the Health Employees Union, the BC Government and Service Employees Union and the International Union of Operating Engineers, included \$500 million worth of concessions over three years. This included the cancellation of negotiated wage increases, wage rollbacks, and unpaid increases to the length of the workday. Some 5,250 workers could still have lost their jobs, according to the terms of the agreement.

Of 22,000 ballots cast, 57 percent were against the proposed settlement.

Toronto Catholic school teachers locked out

As of Friday the May 16, 3,900 teachers at Toronto’s 169 Catholic elementary schools were locked out by their employer, the Toronto District Catholic School Board. According to union sources, the lockout is the largest in Ontario History, affecting 69,000 students.

The teachers, who have been without a contract since September 1, 2002, are demanding wage increases of approximately seven percent over two years, as well as increased benefits. The school board’s most recent offer was for 6.5 percent over two years. The teachers have been engaged in a work-to-rule action since May 5 in support of their demands, refusing administrative duties and extra-curricular supervision.

The *Toronto Star* cited the comments of Grade 4 teacher Nancy Barone, who said, “It seems like our board is in the back pockets of the government.”



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