

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 June 2003

Mexican teachers continue mobilization

The National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), a dissident wing of the Mexican National Teachers Union (SNTE), continued protests in Mexico City last week. CNTE leaders warned that unless the federal government addressed their demands for higher wages and more money for schools they would escalate their protest. Up until this week government officials have claimed the union's demands were beyond the jurisdiction of the federal government and that the CNTE should address its demands to state officials instead.

On May 27 thousands of CNTE members marched on the Government Ministry (SEGOB), where negotiations are taking place. There they confronted the police; a police truncheon injured one teacher.

Last week was the fifth time teachers have marched on the SEGOB building since the mobilizations began about a month ago. The teachers, many of them from the impoverished states of Michoacan and Oaxaca, have set up a camp in Mexico City's Zocalo Square.

Peruvian president calls out troops against workers

Workers' protests in Lima and other major Peruvian cities are continuing despite the presence of army troops called out by President Alejandro Toledo on May 27. Following three days of relative calm, Peruvian trade unions announced June 1 they are prepared to defy a state of emergency this week to support the teachers union (SUTEP). The educators have been on strike since May 12, demanding a raise in wages. SUTEP leaders vowed to continue their struggle and denounced the government for its policy of "blood and fire" against the teachers.

The General Peruvian Workers' Federation (CGTP) announced plans for a rally and mass mobilizations on June 3 to press the government to suspend a 30-day state of emergency. Under the order the teachers strike was declared illegal and army troops attacked protesting workers, killing one student and injuring scores of other demonstrators. More than 300 workers were also arrested. Teachers were given until June 2 to return to their posts or face dismissal.

SUTEP indicated that the strike would continue until the Toledo administration agrees to abide by an existing agreement and uphold the president's promise to double teachers' salaries during his term in office. Veteran teachers earn about 800 soles a month (approximately US\$250). Teachers have rejected a government offer of 100 soles a month.

A Toledo spokesperson denounced the CGTP for supporting the teachers, saying it broke the social pact of "peace, order and tranquility" with the government.

The state of emergency gives the government broad powers to suspend democratic rights, including freedom of assembly, and gives the police the right to break into private homes with no warrant. The government has raised the sinister claim that the "Shining Path" guerrilla organization is behind the protests in order to set the stage for stepped-up repression.

On May 30, more than 10,000 workers and students attended Edwin Vilca Cruz's funeral. The 22-year-old education student was gunned down by army troops in the southern city of Puno. Protesters chanted, "Toledo, liar and assassin."

Unemployed protest in Argentina

On May 27 more than 3,000 unemployed workers and pensioners rallied in Buenos Aires in the first mass protest since President Nestor Kirchner assumed power last week. The demonstrators marched through central Buenos Aires, rallied at the Plaza de Mayo, across from Argentina's Government House, and presented the government with a petition demanding that it create 22,000 more jobs for the unemployed and increase unemployment subsidies from the current US\$50 a month to US\$100. Many of the marchers walked with the tools of their trades, demanding work instead of jobless benefits.

Two million workers receive the subsidy. According to government estimates, the minimum a family of four needs to feed itself in Argentina today is US\$117 a month. Argentina is undergoing its worst economic crisis in history. Official unemployment is 18 percent and nearly 60 percent of Argentines live below the poverty line.

Costa Rican government workers to strike this week

Over 30 unions and social organizations on May 30 called for a national strike—to begin this week—in support of the struggle of electric utility workers employed by the Costa Rican Electric Institute (ICE). The strike would shut down ports, banks, schools and public health clinics and involve up to 120,000 public employees and 50,000 teachers.

ICE workers have been on strike since May 16 to oppose the layoff of 3,000 workers. The workers accuse President Abel Pacheco of starving ICE of government funds to justify its sale to transnational corporations.

Uruguayan workers to strike against President Battle

On June 1 Uruguayan trade unions announced their intention to carry out a 24-hour national strike June 17 against the policies of the Jorge Battle government. The Workers Plenary Intersyndicat and National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT), Uruguay's trade union federation, called for the strike to force Battle into wage and employment negotiations.

The PIT-CNT also announced a plan to mobilize its members to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup that imposed a brutal 12-year dictatorship on June 27, 1973.

Ecuador's teachers strike

Ecuadorian teachers are in the third week of a national strike over wages. On May 27 the government of President Lucio Gutierrez announced it was unable to give the 120,000 teachers a raise.

The National Educator's Union (UNE) is demanding a raise of US\$20 a month. Present salaries range between US\$150 and US\$350 a month. In addition to the wage increase, UNE is demanding US\$165 million to improve schools. Gutierrez said the government could not afford what the teachers were asking and offered a raise of US\$5 a

month.

Indiana parts plant strike enters eighth month

Workers at Auburn Gear Inc. continue to walk the picket line in opposition to the company's demand to terminate health insurance benefits for retirees. One hundred members of United Auto Workers Local 825 walked off the job last November 4 when the company refused to withdraw a contract proposal that called for the termination of retiree benefits along with a reduction in the company's contribution to current employees' pension plans.

"The retirees paid their dues," striker Duane Colgan told the *Journal Gazette*. "The retirement benefits were a promise which management is now going back on." Strikers point out that over the years they have sacrificed pay increases to maintain benefits going back to when the present owners bought the plant from Borg-Warner Corporation in 1982.

Adelphia workers strike in West Virginia

Forty-two members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in West Virginia are into their second week of a strike against the bankrupt Adelphia Communications. The company is refusing to offer any sort of pay increase during the life of a proposed new contract and also wants to eliminate binding arbitration and a just-cause disciplinary standard.

CWA Local 2004 President Ron Gaskins said the company is paying its two top executives \$41 million. The CWA represents 500 Adelphia workers at 12 locations. Five of those groups are working under extended contracts that expired in October 2002 while four are bargaining for their first-ever contracts.

Nuclear plant escalates union-busting against New Jersey strikers

Management at the strikebound Oyster Creek nuclear power plant in New Jersey mailed out information and forms to 215 striking workers advising them on how to resign from the union. The letters were received on the same day that AmerGen Energy Company also issued a public statement warning workers they had until the end of the week to accept the last contract offer.

On April 14 the company unilaterally imposed its contract and on May 22 workers walked out. AmerGen plans on reducing the workforce by 15 percent through contract language that will require workers to perform multiple jobs.

In the letter sent out to workers, AmerGen states that while the company "may not discipline you for your refusal to work, you may be temporarily or permanently replaced and ... your paycheck will be stopped." The company is maintaining plant operations with its 240 nonunion workers and another 75 workers imported from its nine other nuclear power plants throughout the nation.

Texas Dow Chemical strike ends

The strike by 1,000 workers at Dow Chemical Company's plant in Freeport, Texas ended May 29 when workers voted 510 to 286 to accept the chemical giant's revised offer. The workers, members of Operating Engineers Local 564, originally walked out on May 20 over the company's demand to eliminate seniority as the basis for job assignments.

The new agreement sets up a joint labor-management committee that is to determine how jobs will be assigned. The company withdrew another demand that would have scrapped the right of workers to launch sympathy strikes on behalf of other bargaining units in the plant. During the strike, some 200 machinists and pipefitters walked out in support of the Operating Engineers.

Lockout at Illinois aerospace plant

About 780 members of United Auto Workers Local 592 are entering their third week of a lockout at the Rockford, Illinois aerospace manufacturer Hamilton Sundstrand. The plant, owned by United Technologies, issued a public statement two days after the lockout began that detailed the most recent proposal and called it a "last, best and final offer."

While the five-year contract offered a 16 percent pay increase, it also contained a clause that would eliminate retiree health benefits after 2008. In addition, employee health care contributions were raised by 15 percent per year. There is widespread speculation that United Technologies will pull its operations out of Rockford unless workers agree to the company's demands.

Workers strike giant nickel producer

Thirty-three hundred workers at Inco Ltd.'s Sudbury plant, as well as 170 workers at the company's Port Colborne refinery, went on strike after talks broke down May 31. The Sudbury operation accounts for 9 percent of global nickel production. No new talks have been scheduled.

Two months of talks failed to produce an offer acceptable to the workers. The major disagreement concerned pensions. The company has reported a pension shortfall of US\$802 million with 45 percent of its workers within three years of retirement. In addition to pension increases, the workers have been demanding that the company abandon demands for health benefit concessions. The workers, represented by Locals 6500 and 6200 of the United Steelworkers, rejected the company's latest offer by a majority of 94.9 percent.

Although production has been halted, the company has been using helicopters to transport nonunion staff across the picket line to do maintenance.

Toronto Catholic teachers protest back-to-work legislation

On May 26, more than 1,000 teachers locked-out by the Toronto Catholic District School Board rallied at Queen's Park to protest the Ontario Tories' back-to-work legislation. The legislation, which is expected to pass into law June 3, includes provisions restricting work-to-rule campaigns for all teachers across the province and is of a piece with the Tories' stated intention of banning all job action by teachers.

The 3,700 Catholic elementary teachers were locked out May 16 after a work-to-rule campaign in which they refused some extracurricular and administrative tasks. The teachers have been without a contract since August 2002. Initially, the teachers were demanding a 10 percent wage increase over two years. Since the provincial head office of their union, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), took over negotiations, this demand has been reduced to less than 8 percent.

The union has accused the school board of "bargaining in reverse"—that is to say, offering progressively worse offers—and has sued for lost wages and benefits. Negotiations presided over by an Ontario Ministry of Labour mediator are to take place this week.



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