

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 June 2003

Ecuadorian teachers defy government threats

On June 6, striking Ecuadorian teachers rejected threats from President Lucio Gutierrez, who has said he will sue teachers in court if they do not return to work. A day earlier, Gutierrez reminded teachers of the legal consequences of striking. "From Monday on we will vigorously apply those sanctions," he said.

Ernesto Castillo, president of the National Educators Union (UNE), indicated that the teachers would defy the government. "This threat will radicalize teachers across the country," he said. "On Monday [June 9] we will begin a hunger strike of indefinite duration with over 200 educators throughout Ecuador."

One hundred twenty thousand Ecuadorian teachers are entering the fourth week of a strike over wages. UNE demands a US\$20 monthly increase, twice the government's offer. Teachers earn US\$150-US\$350 each month.

Mexican teachers protest continues

Thousands of striking teachers, mostly from the states of Oaxaca and Michoacan, are continuing their protest in Mexico City. Most of the teachers, members of the dissident National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), have been camped out in Mexico City's Three Cultures Plaza for a month.

The National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), linked to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, is not participating in the strike and has minimized the strike's impact. Its leaders have been denounced by the CNTE for corruption. In the state of Tabasco, however, SNTE teachers have joined the strike, an indication that the movement may be spreading. The strike is over wages and school funding by the state and federal governments.

Peruvian government makes partial concessions to striking teachers

In the face of massive public support for striking teachers, Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo gave in to some of the teachers' demands on June 5.

In addition to promising to double teachers' pay by 2006, Toledo agreed to cut his own pay from US\$12,000 to US\$6,000 a month. This is the second time Toledo has cut his own pay. Peruvian presidents have been among the highest paid in Latin America. Former President Fujimori's pay was kept confidential, but was thought to be US\$18,000 a month. Even with this latest pay cut—and leaving aside the many perks that he is entitled to—Toledo would still be making 30 times the salary of an average teacher and 52 times the minimum wage of US\$115 a month.

The pressure on the president to reduce his pay intensified after Argentina's new president, Nestor Kirchner, decreed that no public functionary, including himself, would be paid more than US\$1,000 a month.

In the face of the teachers' strike and the mobilization of the trade unions, Toledo called on the army two weeks ago to impose a "state of emergency" that was openly defied by the teachers and their

supporters. Polls indicate that Toledo's approval rating has sunk to 11.7 percent, while 84 percent of the public defends the teachers' wage demands as "just." Toledo has yet to lift the state of emergency.

Chilean students strike in defense of education

On June 5, police arrested about 40 students and evicted over 52,000 Chilean university students who had occupied the Education Ministry for four hours. The students—from three public universities—had chained the doors of the building and built barricades to block entry. They are demanding lower tuition and more financial aid to students.

Universities were made self-financing during the Pinochet dictatorship in 1981. Currently, 18,000 students depend on loans to pay for their education, which must be repaid. The government accuses public universities of not aggressively collecting overdue loan payments. For that reason, it has resisted providing more student loans.

The students, who began their mobilization in April, are demanding that tuition be frozen at last year's level. University authorities had proposed an increase of 10-20 percent. On May 21, police arrested more than 230 students in the port city of Valparaiso, where President Ricardo Lagos was scheduled to speak.

The Chilean Student Confederation announced plans for mass rallies across the country this Thursday in an escalation of the struggle.

Tentative agreement in New Jersey teachers' strike

The New Jersey Education Association and negotiators for the North Warren Regional School District reached a tentative agreement in the early morning hours of June 7, ending a three-day strike by 109 teachers, aides, secretaries and custodians. The strike threatened to escalate into a major conflict after teachers defied an order by State Superior Court Judge Roger Mahon to return to work without a contract.

Mahon ordered that teachers not returning to work be fined US\$250 a day. School superintendent John Toleno followed up with a provocative statement, declaring, "I don't think the \$250 fine is enough. I wanted a thousand dollars in fines, jail time and loss of jobs."

Terms of the tentative agreement have not been disclosed pending votes by the teachers union and school board. Teachers had been asking for a 4.3 percent pay hike while the school board had pushed for a lower amount. Teachers also opposed a three-tier health plan that would have teachers paying different amounts. While the strike was the first in the district's history, past negotiations have been difficult. The old contract covering North Warren teachers expired in July of last year. Karen Joseph of the New Jersey Education Association told the *Pocono Record*, "For the past 10 years, our contracts have been allowed to expire. At one point, it took two years to agree on a contract. We are getting tired of it."

East Coast longshore workers refuse to service cargo ships

East Coast longshore workers have refused to unload 11 ships owned by the Taiwan-based Evergreen Marine Corporation at nine

different Atlantic ports. Members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) halted both loading and unloading Evergreen's ships starting on May 14, after the company refused to negotiate with five office workers at Evergreen's US headquarters in Morristown, N.J.

The workers, called port captains, voted 3-2 to join the ILA back in December. In April, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) determined the workers could join the ILA, but Evergreen refused to negotiate. Evergreen has taken its case to the US Circuit Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia and is also demanding the NLRB make a determination that the ILA strike is illegal.

Evergreen's actions appear to constitute a sort of provocation to win government support against the ILA. An Evergreen spokesperson stated, "We were struck before we had a mandate to bargain. If it comes out we do not win this decision, or the appeal, we sit down and bargain immediately."

ILA members have "hot-cargoed" ships in Newark and Elizabeth, N.J.; New York; Baltimore; Charleston, S.C.; Hampton Road, Va.; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; and Savannah, Ga. Most of Evergreen's ships have been diverted to Halifax and Nova Scotia in Canada, or to Colon, Panama. The action has affected US retailers such as Costco and Wal-Mart, which import goods through Evergreen.

Dairy workers strike in three states

Some 200 dairy workers at seven plants in three Midwestern states went on strike June 6 after the Teamsters failed to reach a contract agreement with Roberts Dairy Company before a contract extension ran out. The Teamsters also charged Roberts with threats and intimidation against union members.

Roberts admits that it began showing its most recent contract offer to workers in an attempt to "inform" them. The Teamsters want a four-year contract that would expire at the same time as Teamsters contracts that cover other workers at Roberts' operations.

About 100 Teamsters drivers and inside workers are striking in Omaha, Nebr., joined by another 100 at Nebraska plants located in Grand Island, Lincoln, Norfolk and West Point, and plants in Sioux City, Iowa, and Salina, Kans.

Maryland tannery workers strike

About 750 tannery workers near Williamsport, Md., went on strike June 1 at two of Garden State Tanning's facilities over pay and a variety of other issues. In January, some 500 piece-rate workers organized by UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, took US\$4- to US\$6-an-hour pay cuts.

In the present negotiations, Garden State has called for the freezing of pensions for certain high-seniority workers and instead is pushing an inferior 401(k) plan. The company also wants to ignore seniority when new positions open up. Striker Shawn Kocher told the *Herald-Mail*, "I bit the bullet because I like my job," referring to a US\$15,000-a-year pay cut he took in January, but commented on the present company demands, "We can't take it no more."

Demonstrations across Ontario demand raise in minimum wage

Thousands turned out last Thursday in a coordinated demonstration in communities across the province to demand an increase to the minimum wage in Ontario, which has remained at C\$6.85 an hour since 1995.

Calling itself the "Ontario Needs a Raise Coalition," the organization of trade unions, social justice groups and community activists launched the campaign to raise the minimum wage to C\$10 an hour in the run-up to an anticipated provincial election this year. The incumbent Tory government has carried out huge cuts to welfare

and introduced other measures aimed against the poor since taking office eight years ago. The opposition NDP and Liberal parties are attempting to make the minimum wage an election issue despite their record in contributing to the demonization of the poor.

Following a press conference last Thursday at noon in Toronto, demonstrations were held in at least 20 communities across Ontario in a concerted protest against the attacks on the poor by the current government. The NDP has said that, if elected, it will raise the minimum wage to C\$8 an hour immediately while the Liberals would do so over a four-year period.

Air traffic controllers poised for job action

Following failed negotiations last week between the union representing 2,300 air traffic controllers and their employer Nav Canada, unspecified job action could come at any time. The Canadian Air Traffic Controllers Association (CATCA), which is affiliated with the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), has been without a contract for over two years but with the exception of training personnel has no legal right to strike.

Controllers have been seeking improvements in wages and work schedules in a number of job actions over the past year that limited the number of new controllers being licensed. Talks between the two sides broke down last week, and a Friday deadline came and went without any agreement being reached. A government mediator has recommended a wage increase of from 2.5 to 3.0 percent in a four-year contract, terms accepted by the union but to which Nav Canada has so far not responded.

The dispute comes amidst mass layoffs for the country's largest air carrier, beleaguered Air Canada, in an unprecedented concessions contract negotiated by the CAW last week. Talks resumed this week despite a union ultimatum last week to revoke acceptance of the mediator's report and call a strike if a deal was not reached by Friday. It is unclear what the impact of a strike would be given the legal limitations in place.



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