

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 October 2003

Chilean teachers demand wage increase

Chilean teachers have set an October 15 deadline for negotiations over wages. The educators are demanding a 55 percent wage increase over four years. They currently earn a paltry US\$650 a month.

Barring any resolution of the dispute, teachers have scheduled a 48-hour strike on October 23. High school teachers, who are often forced to teach in several schools in order to make ends meet, have come to be called “taxi-professors.”

Education Minister Sergio Bitar called the teachers’ demands out of line with the country’s economic growth. He declared that, while talks will continue, he is presenting a proposal that would end the practice of paying teachers solely by seniority and replace it with a performance-based system.

Brazilian oil workers reject Petrobras offer

The United Federation of Oil Workers (FUP) rejected a proposed wage increase of 10.7 percent from the state-owned oil company Petrobras. Workers are to meet this week to decide on a date for a 72-hour strike.

The FUP said it will not consider an increase of less than 15.5 percent. While consumer inflation in Brazil has slowed dramatically since July, between August 2002 and July 2003 prices increased by about 40 percent. Currently inflation is rising at about 15 percent a year.

St. Louis grocery strike closes in on one week

Some 10,000 grocery workers for three supermarket chains in St. Louis, Missouri continue to strike over wages and health care benefits in the city’s first major grocery strike. The workers voted to walk out by a margin of 3,610 to 1,991 on September 30 and launched their strike the middle of last week.

The three chains—Schnuck Markets, Dierbergs Markets and Shop ’n Save Warehouse Foods—met with UFCW President Nick Torpea last February and asked the union to forgo pattern bargaining and instead negotiate a master agreement that would allow them to

seek better terms from insurance companies on health care. Since then, Torpea was sentenced to three months of home confinement for lying to a federal investigator about using union members to do work on his home.

Meanwhile, the grocery chains have pushed to require workers to pay out-of-pocket costs for various health care services, including doctor visits, emergency room treatment and prescription drugs. In addition, spouses who are offered health insurance at their workplaces are required to use their employers’ medical plans. Grocery management offered a wage increase of 75 cents an hour over four years, along with a 20-cent-an-hour ratification bonus. The wage increases apply only to workers who make \$9 an hour or more.

State of Washington governor advocates breaking teachers strike

Governor Gary Locke of Washington state is pressuring the Marysville school district to hold classes this week as 690 teachers conclude their sixth week on strike in a district serving 11,000 students. Locke first met with school board officials last week and then with teachers’ union officials before announcing he favored reopening the schools despite the fact teachers are without a contract.

Marysville teachers are now engaged in the state’s longest teachers strike. They seek an 11 percent raise over three years while the school board is demanding a salary freeze. Teachers also want to retain their local salary schedule, which rewards experienced teachers, as opposed to a state schedule.

California poultry workers dump union

Poultry workers at the Foster Farms chicken and turkey processing plant in Livingston, California voted last week to oust the United Food and Commercial Workers union by a 1,608 to 494 margin. According to the *Modesto Bee*, “Workers said they increasingly were reluctant to pay dues to a union that could not secure better wages and benefits.” Workers paid the UFCW \$24 a month in dues.

For 35 years the Livingston plant was a union facility. In 1997 workers waged a 15-day strike. It resulted in a contract pegging wages at an average of \$8.71 an hour. According to the Labor Department, wages in US slaughterhouses averaged \$9.60 an hour in 2001. Thirty-five percent of the industry's workers are unionized.

Foster Farms is the largest poultry company on the West Coast and employs about 10,000 workers in five states, the majority in California.

West Coast ferry workers hold strike vote

The British Columbia Ferry and Marine Workers' Union (BCFMW) will hold a strike vote this week to oppose what the union is calling "extreme" changes being proposed by their employer, the newly-privatized B.C. Ferry Services.

Although the current contract doesn't expire until the end of the month, the union executive voted unanimously to hold the vote in response to the company's intransigent position on a range of issues including contracting out, wages and pensions. Essential services provisions would require the ferry service to continue operation in the event of a strike but at vastly reduced capacity.

Vancouver's poor organize against victimization

In a defensive move against mounting police harassment a number of destitute panhandlers and "squeegee kids" have joined the International Workers of the World (IWW). They have joined the Vancouver chapter in an effort to gain public support for their right to solicit charity from passing motorists. A rush hour demonstration was held last Friday in downtown Vancouver to publicize their fight and further protests are planned.

The IWW is not officially a union but a holdover from a political organization early in the last century that promoted the formation of "one big union" to fight for a better deal for workers. Explaining the organization drive the IWW cite the increased issuing of \$86 jaywalking tickets to panhandlers and squeegee kids who can little afford to pay and often wind up in jail. The group has previously come to the defense of sex trade workers and bike couriers in the city. At the same time, city council is moving to hold a public forum to put an end to "aggressive" panhandlers, that they say are a growing problem in Vancouver.

New Brunswick strike hits colleges

The strike by 533 government workers that began

October 3 has forced the suspension of classes at a number of community colleges as a result of unsanitary conditions arising from the withdrawal of janitorial services. Along with custodial workers the strike affects food service workers, lab assistants and correctional officers, half of whom are deemed to be in essential services. They are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees and have been without a contract since last December.



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