

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 October 2003

## Teachers strike in Chile

Teachers in Chile carried out a 48-hour strike October 23-24 to demand a wage increase. On October 24, 3,000 teachers marched through downtown Santiago and rallied at the Education Ministry. Teachers are demanding an 11.7 percent increase each year over the next five years. About 60 percent of the country's 100,000 teachers joined the job action.

The government has offered a one-time increase above inflation of 13 percent this year. However, Education Minister Sergio Bijar also favors tying teachers' wages to performance rather than seniority.

## University strike in Venezuela

Forty-five thousand professors carried out a 24-hour strike October 24 against 17 state-run universities in Venezuela to demand back pay.

The strike was the second in a week. The president of the Federation of Venezuelan University Professor Associations (FAPUV), Jose Rafael Casal, explained that the government has not responded to their demands and promised that the educators would escalate their job action unless the government addresses them. Collectively, the professors are owed \$351 million.

## Argentine government confronts the unemployed

The government of Nestor Kirchner announced it would take a harder line against the unemployed movement in Argentina. The new policy comes in the wake of a demonstration at the Labor Ministry during which the minister and some of his aides were not allowed to leave the building for 12 hours.

Kirchner instructed Labor Minister Carlos Tomada to sue the organizations involved in criminal court. Government officials denied that the administration intends to suppress these organizations: "We are analyzing alternative means to signal the unemployed that such actions will no longer be tolerated," declared a government spokesperson.

On Wednesday, October 15, two groups of unemployed surrounded the Labor Ministry at 5 p.m.

and prevented the minister from leaving until 5 a.m. the following day. The workers were demanding jobless pay for 3,000 unemployed heads of households.

The ministry has denied the workers' petition, claiming that alternative welfare measures exist.

## Mediated talks begin in St. Louis grocery strike

Negotiators for 10,000 striking and locked-out grocery workers and three supermarket chains in St. Louis, Missouri agreed to negotiations for the first time since workers walked out on strike October 7. United Food and Commercial Workers Local 655 agreed to a gag order by the National Mediation and Conciliation Service and the location of talks is not being divulged.

The Greater St. Louis Food Employers Council, a business coalition representing Shop 'n Save Warehouse Foods Inc., Schnuck Markets and Dierbergs Markets Inc.—the three chains involved in the work stoppage—issued a statement calling its last offer "a very fair contract, which was agreed to and recommended by the Union." It added, "Council employers have no interest in increasing the cost of this contract."

The talks are expected to rearrange the companies' previous offer because Local 655 bylaws prohibit a second vote on a contract that has already been rejected. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* quoted one striker who said, "It's one giveback after another giveback after another giveback after giveback." He continued, "People have gotten progressively sick and tired of giving things up, for themselves and future generations."

## Federal immigration raid on Wal-Mart

Federal agents launched a 21-state raid on 60 Wal-Mart stores, arresting more than 300 undocumented workers in an immigration sweep code-named "Operation Rollback." The arrested workers were mostly of Eastern European origins.

Wal-Mart said the immigrants were employed by a third-party contractor. Agents removed several boxes of

documents from an executive's office at Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Victor Zavala, an immigrant from Mexico, was one of the arrested workers. He told the *New York Times* he worked every night of the year except for Christmas and New Year's Eve and received no health care coverage. Misha Firer, from Russia, said he earned \$6 an hour washing and waxing floors using chemicals that caused nosebleeds, sore eyes and skin irritations.

### **University of Minnesota clerical workers on strike**

Clerical workers at the University of Minnesota entered their second week on strike with no negotiations scheduled. U of M President Robert Bruininks has insisted that the administration will make no concessions in the school's first strike in 50 years. University negotiators are attempting to take away traditional step increases of 2 percent per year in the two-year agreement while offering a one-time 2.5 percent raise in the second year.

Local 3800 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees is striking to maintain the step increase in addition to the 2.5 percent wage increase. The university also wants to increase health care premiums by \$15 per paycheck for individuals and \$37 for family coverage.

Eighty-eight percent of the local's eligible voting membership voted to authorize strike action, however it is estimated that only 45 percent of the 1,900 bargaining unit members are participating in the job action.

### **B.C. government insurance facing strike action**

The provincially run Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) was given a 72-hour strike notice on October 27 that could mean a walkout as early as October 30. Workers at ICBC are represented by the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and have been without a contract since June 30 of this year. Contract negotiations broke off August 27.

The state-run insurance company in the province is facing increased privatization under changes introduced by the Liberal government and this has meant more demands for concessions from its workers. One of the chief concessions that the union is fighting is a proposed pay-for-performance scheme put forward by the company to increase worker productivity. Other concessions sought by the company include changes to

work schedules to grant more flexibility to the company in servicing its customers.

### **Deal reached in Toronto area school strike**

A strike by 428 teaching aides in the Halton District School Board north of Toronto was brought to an end October 19 when their union reached a tentative settlement with the school board that has since been ratified.

Educational assistants at the board are represented by the Halton District Education Assistants' Association and had been without a contract since August 2001. They struck October 7 in a battle to bring their wages in line with their counterparts at other neighboring school boards. While details of the agreement have yet to be made public, the union has insisted the membership would be satisfied with the deal. The board had been demanding increased hours as a condition for any wage increase in the duration of the contract, which currently runs two years. Most of educational assistants are employed serving students with special needs at elementary schools.

### **Engineers settle strike at Atomic Energy**

Five hundred fifty engineers and scientists at Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. (AECL) have gone back to work, ending a walkout that began September 8. Members of the Society of Professional Engineers and Associates are to vote this week on a tentative contract with AECL that reportedly includes annual wage and cost-of-living increases of 2 percent and comparable increases for merit and experience over the term of a three-year deal. The Society said some concerns over job security raised during negotiations have not been answered in the new contract, but these issues be dealt with in the coming months.



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