

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Ecuador teachers' protest continues

On November 5 and 6, 120,000 Ecuadorian teachers carried out a 48-hour strike. Their union, the National Educators' Union (UNE), then announced plans for a national strike this week. At issue are wage promises the government of President Lucio Gutierrez failed to carry out.

This June, following a bitter 28-day strike, the government agreed to raise wages and to invest \$11.7 million in education. UNE leaders have pointed out that these promises have yet to be implemented.

The Gutierrez administration is currently debating a \$7 billion government budget. Nearly half the budget would go to pay foreign banks for past debts (\$2.4 billion) and to beef up the country's military (\$1.05 billion), crowding out funds for education and social programs.

Gutierrez and his left-of-center "Movimiento 21" emerged from a coalition critical of former president Noboa's subservience to Wall Street and the United States. However, he has turned his back on campaign promises to teachers and other workers, and pursued virtually the same course as Noboa.

Government minister Felipe Mantilla threatened to ban student rallies in support of the teachers.

Bolivia: new protests against the government

Roberto de la Cruz, secretary of the Regional Workers' Central of El Alto, announced November 5 that unions and rural organizations will launch a new campaign of anti-government demonstrations in and around La Paz. Last month, widespread protests forced the resignation of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada.

De la Cruz demanded that the government of President Carlos Mesa withdraw draft tax legislation—imposed by the International Monetary Fund—to increase the tax burden on Bolivians. He also demanded the government set up industries to utilize its natural gas domestically, instead of exporting it.

Bolivian authorities have warned that, barring tax increases or emergency contributions from banks and international institutions, Bolivia will resort to printing massive amounts of money to balance its budget—resulting in the kind of hyperinflation that occurred in Bolivia during the 1980s, when prices rose by 26,000 percent.

Paraguayan teachers' strike continues

Forty thousand public school teachers have been on strike for more than two weeks in Paraguay. The educators are protesting President Nicanor Duarte's plan to increase the retirement age from 40 to 52.

Currently, the teachers' pension fund is insolvent, with a \$15 million shortfall. Education Minister Blanca Ovelar pointed out that some union officials are ready to accept the new retirement age, as long as contributions are lowered.

As a practical matter, very few teachers are in a position to retire at 40. Living standards have plummeted in Paraguay since 1991; ten years of negative 2.2 percent economic growth have sharply reduced yearly per-capita incomes, which now stand at \$1,300, down from \$1,900 in 1997.

Peruvian workers demand jobs

On November 4, thousands of unemployed workers rallied at the International Labor Organization (ILO) offices in Lima, asking that it intervene with the government of Alejandro Toledo to provide them with jobs. Many of these workers had been sacked during the previous administration of Alberto Fujimori. As part of the process of privatizing state-owned firms, about 300,000 workers lost their jobs.

On the same day, 13,000 employees of Peruvian courts and hundreds of public health nurses went on strike against a national test. Court workers fear that those who do not pass the test will be fired. Nurses are demanding higher wages; in Lima, striking nurses marched on Congress.

University of Minnesota clerical strike settled

A strike by University of Minnesota clerical workers ended November 4 after union officials and the administration reached a tentative agreement. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) declined to make details of the agreement public, but university president Robert Bruininks indicated that the settlement "was within the financial guidelines we had set for all employee groups."

The university administration, reacting to a cut of \$185 million by the state legislature, moved to impose higher health care costs on all its workers. But clerical workers, who receive a median pay of about \$29,000, opposed the measure along with the takeaway of 2 percent yearly step increases. The university's original offer contained a single 2.5 percent pay raise in the second year of the agreement and a sop in the form of a \$200 payment in exchange for implementing health care premium deductions.

It is believed that university's latest offer may have increased the \$200 one-time payment while modifying language covering the recall of laid-off workers and other work rules.

New York City "21" club strike ends

Negotiators for Local 100 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) and seven New York City restaurants reached contract agreements and ended a strike at the "21" club, which the union had targeted for a labor stoppage. A strike that began November 4 at La Caravelle continued while workers at another 17 restaurants remain without a contract.

Exact details of the agreements are not known. The strike was triggered by workers' opposition to the restaurant owners' demand to have employees start paying health care premiums. Management is seeking \$5 a week contribution for the first year, followed by \$10 a week in the second year and \$15 in the third. Owners are offering wage increases of \$45 a week over three years to cooks, \$36 to dishwashers and no increases to waiters. The union is seeking \$60 over three years for cooks and dishwashers.

Indiana workers strike to protest victimization and get union recognition

Drivers and dispatchers for Service Sanitation of Gary, Ind., went on strike October 28 after the company fired driver Jeff Clark, who led the effort to unionize the operation's 30 workers. Nearly all of the workers had signed authorization cards for the Teamsters union, but management refused to accept a card count and is insisting on an election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Teamster business agent Larry Reagan said an NLRB vote would cause a six-week delay and permit the company to further retaliate against workers. The Teamsters have filed two unfair labor practice charges against the company, one of which maintains Clark was fired for obtaining signatures from fellow workers to join the Teamsters.

House legislation permits privatization of air traffic control towers

The House of Representatives voted 211-207 at the end of October to approve a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization measure that will allow the privatization of air traffic control towers. Organizations such as the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) saw the measure as not only threatening the jobs and living standards of those who staff control towers, but also endangering public safety.

The original FAA reauthorization that passed both the House and Senate expressly prohibited privatization. But during conference negotiations, Republicans inserted language that would permit privatization. In an earlier plan, the conference bill allowed 69 airport towers to be contracted out. House Transportation and Infrastructure Aviation Subcommittee chairman John Mica (R-Fla.), in an effort to get backing from reluctant House Republicans, pulled 30 airports out of the plan that were nested in Republican districts. "We may have to take

it tower by tower" to get enough votes, said Mica.

At a later point, Mica floated a plan to shift the air traffic control workforce to the military. An aide declared the military does not "get bogged down in union politics." President Reagan used military personnel to operate control towers in 1981 after the Republican president fired 13,000 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO).

Eleven Republicans voted against the FAA reauthorization because it contained a provision, called "cabotage," which would permit foreign air carriers to transport cargo from point-to-point within the US.

West Coast forestry workers stage one-day strike

As many as 5,000 forestry workers in British Columbia walked off the job last Thursday, November 6, as 61 coastal forest companies in the Forest Industrial Relations group (FIR) voted to reject the union's latest contract offer. The Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA), which represents the workers, countered company claims that it was an illegal strike by pointing out that they had been in a legal strike position since the end of September. Further, the union asserted the walkout was actually a "study session." The FIR sought an injunction against the union over the strike action and has said it will apply to the labor board for damages.

The union had been seeking improvements in a six-year contract with wage increases totaling 11 percent, improved severance and pension provisions, and increased job security. This goes against industry proposals to slash spending and cut labor costs by up to 30 percent in a major restructuring initiative. The union has refused proposals for an industry-wide contract, pointing to regional differences in working conditions. The IWA represents more than 12,000 forestry workers in B.C., two-thirds of whom continued working during the walkout. With the rejection of the latest union proposal, contract negotiations resumed early this week.



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