

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Puerto Rican hotel workers demand year-end bonus

One-hundred-and-eighty workers at the Diamond Palace Hotel and Casino in San Juan set up picket lines demanding that management pay the traditional year-end bonus of \$250. Hotel management claims that economic hardship prevents them from paying the bonus.

Victor Villalba, president of the Federation of Private Industry Workers (FTEP), declared that the casino industry is very profitable in Puerto Rico and cast doubt on Diamond Palace's claim.

Workers interviewed by San Juan's *Nuevo Dia* daily confirmed that the revenue from gambling in the month of November alone was \$250,000, more than 20 times what they are demanding in bonuses.

Puerto Rico taxi strike

Taxi drivers in San Juan carried out a one-day strike over fares between the San Juan airport and 15 cities beyond San Juan. The drivers were demanding a \$5 to \$25 increase. During the strike, 300 tourist car drivers refused to pick up passengers at the airport, causing traffic congestion and disrupting tourist travel.

The strike ended in a compromise settlement with the Federation of Taxi and Tourist Companies. Fares will increase by \$10 during a 60-day test period in the municipalities of Aguas Buenas, Gurabo, Adjuntas, Aguada, Aguadilla, Barranquitas, Cataño, Canóvanas, Cidra, Caguas Luquillo, Mayagüez, Rincón, Yauco and Isabela.

Taxi drivers insist that the previous fares, in existence since 1998, did not fully compensate the actual cost of driving passengers out of town.

Sweatshop layoffs in Mexico

Low-wage, export-oriented factories, the so-called *maquiladoras*, are slashing jobs at an alarming rate, according to recent statistics from Mexico's National Statistics Institute (INEGI).

While layoffs have taken place across the country, Mexico City, Puebla and Durango were the worst hit. Employment in those three regions dropped by 42.5 percent, 40.0 percent and 26.2 percent, respectively, in the last three years. In Puebla, site of a Volkswagen assembly plant, more than 16,000 jobs have disappeared as transnational companies have fled for lower-wage regions in Central America and Asia. Since 2002, 300 *maquiladoras* have moved from Mexico to China.

For example, Microsoft has shifted production of its popular Xbox game console from Guadalajara, Mexico, to China. While

Puebla has had some success in attracting auto parts plants, these tend to be capital-intensive and have not compensated for the loss of 31,000 jobs in more labor-intensive garment factories.

Accompanying this trend has been a drop in real wages and benefits for workers of 5.6 percent.

Ecuador public health workers strike

On December 16, 14,000 public health workers carried out a 48-hour work stoppage. The workers are demanding a wage increase and payment of back wages. Workers average \$60 per month. They are owed a Christmas bonus, mandated by law, and other back wages.

Ecuador teachers initiate hunger strike

Four-hundred-and-seventy-two educators from across Ecuador launched a hunger strike on December 15. Its purpose is to pressure the government of President Lucio Gutierrez into keeping his promise to raise teachers' wages. Ecuador's 120,000 public school teachers have been on strike since November 11.

Last June, in a deal to end a 28-day strike, the government agreed to a contract that included raising teachers' salaries. Since then, the government has insisted it has no money.

On December 16, several hundred teachers and their children marched in Quito, pressing their demands. A group of children chanting "Go home, miserable government" carried a sign that said, "Teacher's children have a right to Christmas."

Forty-eight-hour doctors' strike in Chile

Public health doctors conducted a 48-hour strike in Chile against the privatization of the health care system. The doctors oppose legislation drafted by the government of President Ricardo Lagos, known as the AUGE Plan, which rations out medical care and which would allow the transfer of patients to private clinics, introducing privatization in a piecemeal fashion.

More than 75 percent of the country's population cannot afford private care and depend on the country's public health system.

Workers march in Buenos Aires

A march to commemorate the second anniversary of the revolt that forced the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa took place December 20 in Argentina's capital. On December 19, 2001, in the wake of a financial collapse, thousands rallied at Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo square, across from the country's government palace, the Rose House. They demanded jobs, that the banks release their savings and an end to neo-liberal free market economic policies. The marchers were attacked by the police, and about 30 workers were killed in Buenos Aires and other cities. The enraged population took to the streets the following day, forcing de la Rúa to resign.

Foundry company indicted for hazardous working conditions

On December 15, federal prosecutors charged Atlantic States Cast Iron Pipe Co. and five current or former managers in a 35-count indictment for conspiracy and other violations relating to unsafe working conditions. It is estimated that the New Jersey facility, owned by McWane Inc. of Birmingham, Alabama, along with 12 other of the company's foundries in the US and Canada, caused an estimated 4,600 injuries and nine deaths.

An affidavit written by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) charged: "To Atlantic States' blue-collar work force, composed in large part of immigrants, some non-English speakers, all working in an area with few jobs that could support a family, these defendants routinely presented a harsh choice. Perform an unreasonably dangerous work task or lose your job; work injured or lose your job; lie to OSHA [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] or lose your job; lie to environmental regulators or lose your job; forego filing workers compensation claims or lose your job."

Workers' injuries included broken bones, amputated limbs and gouged eyes. The company is also accused of pumping contaminants into the Delaware River. One incident resulted in an 8.5-mile oil slick. Robert Ray, a lawyer for McWane and former Whitewater prosecutor, defended the company as a "responsible corporate citizen."

Ratification ends California's longest nurses strike

Registered nurses at two Tenet Healthcare Corp. hospitals in the San Francisco Bay area ratified a new contract after a record 13 months on strike. About 450 members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) voted by a 98 percent margin to accept wage increases of 10 percent across the board in the first year and 20 percent over the next three years.

What provoked the long bitter struggle was the CNA's demand for pensions. At first, Tenet would only consent to a mere increase from 3 to 5 percent in matching funds for a 401(k) retirement plan. Though management did not concede a defined benefit plan, it did offer to pay up to 8 percent of a nurse's salary, varying according to seniority, without requiring nurses to match funds.

Tenet, the nation's second largest hospital chain, viewed any concession on pension issues as a dangerous precedent for its chain of 38 hospitals. During the course of the strike, management spent \$20 million in additional costs for replacement workers. But due to the nation-wide shortage of health care workers, most nurses were able to find full- or part-time work to survive the long strike.

New York supermarkets to compensate workers for minimum wage violations

The New York Attorney General's office reached a settlement that requires the owners of 40 Gristede's and Sloan's supermarkets located in the Manhattan area to pay \$3.2 million to 300 workers who provided delivery services between 1994 and 2000. Workers, many of them immigrants, say they received only \$75 in wages for 60- and 70-hour workweeks.

The settlement also provides for 60 of the delivery workers to become in-house employees, earning \$6 an hour, not including tips, and to receive pension and vacation benefits. It is also reported they will become union members.

In other settlements, the drug store chain Duane Reade agreed to

a \$320,000 settlement for its delivery workers and the Food Emporium agreed to a \$3 million back pay settlement.

BC government ends forestry strike

The strike by 10,000 loggers and sawmill workers, members of Industrial Wood & Allied Workers of Canada (IWA), ended with the passage of Bill 99, the Coastal Forest Industry Dispute Settlement Act, by the provincial Liberal government on December 16. IWA spokesman Dave Haggard welcomed the government intervention, which was taken in response to requests by forestry companies.

Workers went on strike November 21 after the forestry companies used the expiry of the old collective agreement as an opportunity to unilaterally impose drastic concessions on the workers, resulting in an immediate cut of 15 percent in labor costs. The striking workers returned to work under the terms of the contract that expired last June. Veteran mediator Don Munroe has until May 31 to reach a deal with the company and union. If a deal isn't struck by then, the two sides must submit to binding arbitration to settle a contract.

Manitoba factory lockout ends

Faroex Industries, a Gimli, Manitoba, manufacturer of plastic parts for farm equipment and for the province's two bus manufacturers, has ended its lockout of 45 employees. The lockout began after the workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), rejected the company's final contract offer.

Grant Warren, a union spokesman, said that the proposed agreement included an unacceptable wage increase, contracting-out provisions, and no increases in vacations, pensions and other benefits. The lockout ended two days later, after the employees at the company approved a tentative agreement to send their contract dispute with the company to binding arbitration.



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