

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 May 2004

Argentine workers fight for shorter workweek

Delegates from the Buenos Aires subway workers' union have called on the Argentine labor federations to join in a campaign to fight for a shorter workweek with no loss in pay. The purpose of the campaign is to fight double-digit unemployment. Beto Pianelli, one of the subway delegates, explained that the workers wanted to build on the subway employees' conquest of the six-hour day, as a result of a strike in April.

Mexican Social Security workers continue pension fight

The National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS), which represents workers at the Mexican Institute of Social Security, has threatened to strike unless the government of Vicente Fox comes up with new proposals to protect public employees' pensions.

Government officials have reacted with indignation at the workers' demands, claiming that public employees are not entitled to more than private workers. Private sector workers' pensions have been significantly downgraded since they were privatized in 1986. The SNTSS has demanded that the government stop slandering the union employees.

SNTSS officials are also demanding that the federal legislature guarantee workers' pension rights. Union leaders have declared they are prepared to launch a national strike if their demands are not addressed.

The Social Security Institute, which is in charge of public health in Mexico, has been the object of privatization plans by the Fox government. Social Security workers have already accepted increases of about 100 percent in their pension costs. The government is demanding 15 percent more and an increase in the retirement age.

Public health strike in Chile

The Confederation of Municipal Health Workers (CONFUSAM), representing 21,000 public health workers, launched a 48-hour strike May 20 to protest draft legislation that would privatize the public health

system. According to CONFUSAM, 80 percent of its members stayed off work on the first day of the strike. Government officials disputed the union's claim, saying that only 25 percent honored the walkout.

Public health workers are pressing the government to rescind the so-called Universal Access and Explicit Guarantees Plan (AUGE), which created a list of priority conditions that would be treated at both public and private clinics, opening the door to the merging of public clinics into the private health system. The plan is about to be approved by the country's senate.

The strike coincided with a cold spell in Chile and with very high levels of air pollution in Santiago; both conditions caused tens of thousands to attend clinics for treatment of the flu and asthma.

Oil strike continues in Colombia

Two hundred eighty-eight workers have already been fired for participating in the three-week-old strike against *Ecopetrol*, Colombia's government oil company. Among the fired workers are 28 leaders of the oil workers' union (USO).

The strike began April 22 after 17 months of negotiations. The USO opposes government plans to privatize *Ecopetrol*. The company's refineries in Barranquilla and Cartagena, on the country's Caribbean coast, have been placed under military control.

Argentine unemployed demand gas subsidies

On May 22, more than 3,000 unemployed workers marched in Buenos Aires carrying empty propane tanks. The demonstration ended in a rally in front of the country's largest oil company, Repsol-YPF, demanding that the company lower the price of propane for families of the unemployed. The current price for low-income families is 18 pesos (US\$6) per tank. A Repsol spokesperson declared that the government had established the price and that the company would not change it.

The oil company did, however, agree to look into

providing free propane for soup kitchens for the unemployed.

United State

Massachusetts nursing home workers stage one-day strike

One hundred nurses' assistants, housekeepers and licensed nurses held a one-day strike May 18 at the Edgar P. Benjamin Health Care Center in Mission Hill, a section of Boston, Massachusetts, to demand increased wages, health care and improvements in working conditions.

Negotiations between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and management collapsed one day earlier as the union maintained its demand for an overall 20 percent compensation package, while the nursing home held to a 9 percent package.

The union is asking for wage increases of up to US\$1.75 an hour over the course of a three-year agreement, along with shift differentials, a pension plan and 100 percent company-paid health care coverage. At present, Benjamin Health Care Center workers make between US\$9 and US\$11 an hour.

Currently, the SEIU is attempting to settle 20 nursing home contracts across Massachusetts. Only 27 of the state's 480 nursing homes are unionized.

Theater workers hold one-day protest

Theater workers at the Plaza 6 Theaters in Butte, Montana, walked off the job May 21, on the opening night of the film *Troy*, to protest contract violations by Atlanta-based Carmike Cinemas.

Some 14 members of Local 427—involving cashiers, concession workers, custodians, doorpersons and ushers—walked out to call attention to a concerted campaign by management to rid themselves of Montana's only unionized theater through a series of terminations, suspensions, harassments and failures to honor grievance timelines.

Canada

Settlement at Edmonton Catholic School Board

Support staff in the Edmonton Catholic School Board have reached an agreement with their employer. The settlement includes a wage increase of 7 percent over 32 months. The school board has threatened that the wage increase will lead to layoffs. The 800 workers, including teaching assistants, librarians and secretaries, had recently voted 85 percent in favor of strike action that could have commenced this past Friday.

Meanwhile, public school teachers in Edmonton and Calgary, concerned about class sizes and lack of preparation time, are set to hold a strike vote on June 7.

Strike by beer distribution workers ends

The strike by 300 workers at British Columbia's Brewers Distributor Ltd. has ended with the ratification of a new three-year agreement. Only 70 percent of the workers voted in favor of the settlement, which includes a C\$2-per-hour wage increase along with unspecified pension and benefit improvements. The workers, members of the Brewery, Winery and Distillery Workers Union, had also been protesting the company's reliance on seasonal labor as opposed to full-time hiring. It is not clear whether this is addressed in the settlement.



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