

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 June 2004

Latin America

Striking teachers in Honduras block highways

On June 24, tens of thousands of Honduran teachers set up barricades threatening to effectively cut off the country's cities from each other. Security forces assaulted the strikers with tear gas, however, and managed to clear the roads. The protest lasted nine hours. The strike by 60,000 teachers began on June 7.

The protests were directed against President Ricardo Maduro. The strikers have rejected his offer of \$US4.7 million and insist on \$17.6 million. Currently teachers are paid US\$3,500 a year.

Paraguayan teachers on strike

Ten thousand public school teachers began a strike across Paraguay on June 21 over wages. Despite continuing negotiations, most observers expect a long strike. The instructors, members of two teachers' unions, initially demanded a 35 percent wage increase. This was rejected by the government, which offered a seven percent raise. This week the teachers lowered their demand to 20 percent.

Slowdown by Costa Rican air-traffic controllers

Air traffic controllers in Costa Rica, unhappy over their low wages, will carry out on-the-job protests with a rulebook slowdown this week. The workers indicate that an increase in flights into Costa Rica is imposing an additional load on them for which they have not been compensated. In addition to higher wages and better pensions, they are demanding that airport authorities hire more controllers.

Air-traffic controllers' wages have not changed since 1994. Since then, seven more airlines have initiated operations in Costa Rica, while others have increased the number of flights into the country.

Retired workers protest in Ecuador

On June 23 hundreds of pensioners took over social security administration buildings in Quito, Guayaquil and other cities, demanding decent pensions. The retired workers, who had been protesting for seven

days, carried on with their protest despite a government decree to increase the budget for pensions by 250 percent. While it appears significant, the increase is still woefully inadequate because pensions were very low to begin with and their value has been eroded by inflation.

The lowest pension check, currently \$12 per month, would increase to only \$30, nearly one-tenth of what a family needs to live above the poverty line. The retirees are demanding monthly pensions that average \$140.

United States

New Jersey health workers end strike

Workers represented by the Health Professionals and Allied Employees union (HPAE) ended a three-week walkout June 21 at the Bergen Regional Medical Center over staffing levels, wages, and pension funding. Wages were increased to parity with other area hospitals, but the union conceded to management demands, including freezing the hospital's contribution towards pension funds and deferring the issue of staffing levels to a union-management committee. The union also agreed to a three-year contract, putting Bergen Regional on a different contract negotiation schedule than other area hospitals that generally have two-year contracts.

The day after the contract was approved testimony was given to a committee of the New Jersey state assembly about the management company that runs the hospital, Solomon Health Group LLC, which has left a trail of poorly managed and understaffed hospitals in other states. In addition, Bergen County lent the company \$33 million as "working capital"; not only was this not in the contract, but it may be unconstitutional as the New Jersey Constitution bars the lending of public money for private use. Much of this money came out of funds that were earmarked for Medicare and Medicaid.

Bay Area health care union calls of strike threat

The union representing health care workers at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland and Berkeley

said last week it had called off a planned one-day strike scheduled for July 7, following the hospital's decision to let an employee suspended for passing out union leaflets back to work.

The local Service Employees International Union 250, the California Nurses Association, the Health Care Workers Union and Caregivers and Healthcare Employees Union, which represent more than 3,000 workers at the hospital, said they would strike to protest what they alleged were unfair labor practices.

Union members voted early this month to reject a contract offer from the hospital to cover its 1,200 members. The SEIU has said that the hospital has refused to negotiate over elements such as giving front-line workers a voice in staffing and a training fund, provisions other hospitals have included in recent contracts.

Con Ed union agrees to contract

Management for Con Edison, New York's central electrical utility, and the union representing 8,600 Con Ed union workers have reached a tentative agreement on a new contract. Officials of Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers Union of America say the four-year agreement will increase wages and improve pensions and medical benefits. Union officials say the agreement will go before the union's executive board for approval before union members vote on ratification. A Con Ed spokesman says the company is pleased to have reached an agreement.

Union workers had planned to strike at 12:01 a.m. Sunday unless a new deal was reached. The deadline had been extended twice so Con Ed officials and the Utility Workers Union of America could continue negotiating.

Canada

Aliant strikers march in Halifax

About 2,500 striking employees of Atlantic Canada's largest telecommunications company, Aliant, took part in a march through the streets of Halifax on June 23. They went on strike two months ago in defense of job security and pensions. The workers, who are represented by the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and the Atlantic Communication and Technical Workers Union (ACTWU), are seeking to bring pressure on the company to meet their demands.

Alberta teachers vote to strike

On June 21 teachers in Sturgeon School Division in the province of Alberta voted 75 percent in favor of strike action. The 291 teachers, who are members of Alberta Teachers' Association, voted on May 26 to accept a provincial mediator's recommendation for a 2003/2004 collective agreement rejected by the School Board. The previous agreement expired almost a year ago. The dispute takes place amidst negotiations between Alberta teachers and the provincial Tories who are bent on enforcing a ten year contract on public school teachers.

Wildcat garbage strike in Montreal

About 80 workers in the district of Notre Dame de Grace (NDG) in the west end of Montreal walked off the job last week to protest the suspension of fellow workers. Their union has not commented on the walkout, which began June 22, but local politicians are promising to suspend the strikers as well if they don't return to work.



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