

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 June 2004

Latin America

Mexican autoworkers threaten strike

On June 16, 10,000 autoworkers employed by the Volkswagen assembly plant in Puebla, Mexico, voted to strike August 18. The autoworkers are demanding an 8.5 percent raise in wages and a 4.1 percent increase in the value of their benefits.

Miguel Angel Galan Hernandez, leader of the Independent Autoworkers Union, said the company has begun to recover from poor sales. The union hopes this will lead to the elimination of the short workweek (four days on and three days off,) a scheme that the union agreed to in 2003 in exchange for Volkswagen rescinding an announced layoff of 2,000 workers.

In what may be an attempt to pressure VW management into a quick settlement, Galan declared that dissident forces within the union are pressing for greater economic benefits for the workers.

Argentine protests against unemployment

On June 18, unemployed workers carried out a sit-down protest at the headquarters of the private oil firm Repsol-YPF and a Mc Donald's restaurant to publicize chronic unemployment in Argentina. The pickets threatened to stay in the restaurant indefinitely unless the company agreed to provide school-age children with 20,000 milk cartons and 10,000 notebooks.

At Repsol-YPF, company officials let their employees out for the day, fearing that, as in an earlier protest, the workers would occupy the building. In the past, unemployed workers have pressured oil transnationals to lower the price of propane for the unemployed. The official unemployment rate in Argentina now hovers around 14 percent. Unofficially, the figure is close to 20 percent.

Threats of strike at the University of Puerto Rico

The association that represents supervisory and management workers at the University of Puerto Rico threatened last week to call its members out on strike if the institution refuses to accept a year-old proposal that

would raise benefits and improve working conditions.

The association is not legally recognized as a union and is barred from striking. However, the workers voted in December to authorize a strike. Since then there has been little progress in their negotiations. On March 11, the association issued a deadline of 10 days for university officials to respond. The ultimatum was ignored. The association represents 1,000 University of Puerto Rico management employees.

Among the benefits for which the association is asking are maternity and paternity leaves, a more democratic disciplinary process and seniority rights.

Honduran teachers continue struggle

Despite the intervention of the Honduran army, which has begun patrolling roads and airports, striking teachers have barricaded highways across Honduras to press their demands for improved wages. Teachers blocked roads, including border crossings into Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, for several hours. A strike by 60,000 teachers is now on its third week.

Negotiations broke down on June 15 after President Ricardo Maduro repeated his position that the country has no money to improve teachers' salaries.

The educators are asking that the government repay 10 years of delayed benefits and wage increases at a rate of 30 percent per year. The total owed is US\$15 million.

Colombian workers mobilize in defense of trade union rights

On June 21, Coca-Cola workers and their supporters began the "International Caravan for Life." The purpose of the protest is to let people know about the repression targeting Colombian trade union members.

According to the Adital News Agency, nine out of every ten assassinations of union leaders worldwide take place in Colombia. In addition, there are daily incidents of kidnappings, torture and other acts of repression. Wives and children of the union leaders are

included among the victims.

Colombian Coca-Cola workers have borne a disproportionate share of the repression. They insist that paramilitary forces linked to the army and to management are perpetrating the violence with help from the United States.

Paraguayan teachers to strike this week

Public school teachers in Paraguay are set to strike this week. They are demanding that newly graduated teachers, who currently work for no pay, be compensated. They are also demanding a 35 percent across-the-board increase in wages.

On June 16, many teachers walked out for 24 hours. Full-time public school teachers earn 728.20 guaranies (US\$129) per month, while professors earn US\$1.50 per hour.

United States

No settlement in sight for New Jersey nurses' strike

Nurses at Lourdes Medical Center in Willingboro, New Jersey, are completing their ninth week on strike over the hospital's demands to alter work rules. The nurses at the complex object to a proposal that would permit the hospital's 287 full- and part-time nurses to be moved within the various units and impose work schedules at management's whim.

No new talks have been scheduled in the dispute. The bitter feelings in the strike are further fueled by rumors that Catholic Health East, which owns Lourdes Medical Center and another 30 hospitals from Maine to Florida, plans to turn the hospital into a nursing home.

Byline strike at *Wall Street Journal*

Union journalists at the *Wall Street Journal* withheld their names from articles last week to protest the paper's contract demands. Dow Jones, which owns the newspaper, has put forward a proposal that requires employees to begin paying health care premiums.

The independent Association of Publishers' Employees, which represents writers at the *Journal*, has agreed to have its bargaining unit members pay a portion of health care costs. But it is opposing the company's minuscule wage increases that will not make up for the increased costs in medical coverage.

Reporters at *Barron's*, a financial weekly published by Dow Jones, asked that their bylines be removed starting this past weekend. Workers at the two publications have been without a contract since April of

last year. The byline strike is the first in the paper's 113-year history.

Canada

Sudbury Hydro workers strike

Eighty-two workers at Greater Sudbury Hydro Plus went on strike the morning of June 19. Earlier, the workers voted 93 percent in favor of strike action when management presented them with 21 concession demands, including the elimination of retiree benefits for new workers, and provision for contracting out. The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4705. No further talks are currently scheduled.

Nelson city workers locked out

City workers in Nelson, British Columbia, have been locked out since June 18. The 74 workers provide the city's garbage pickup, snow removal, road repair and maintenance, sewage treatment, park maintenance and finance services. They are represented by CUPE Local 339. In late May, the workers rejected the city's final offer, which eliminated minimum staffing levels.

BC health care workers fined

The union representing the 43,000 health care support workers in British Columbia who defied provincial back-to-work legislation has been fined C\$150,000. The workers went on strike April 25, with the Liberal Party-controlled provincial government passing back-to-work legislation four days later. The legislation imposed an 11 percent retroactive pay cut as well as an hour-and-a-half increase in the length of the workweek. The imposed settlement also gave the province's health boards the unfettered right to contract out the hospital workers' jobs.

The strike was widely supported by workers, with nurses refusing to cross the hospital workers' picket lines and other public sectors workers prepared to engage in a province-wide walkout. The Hospital Employees Union (HEU) and the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) sabotaged the strike, agreeing to the government's concession demands and ordering the workers to "stand down."



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