

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 July 2004

Latin America

General strike in Peru

On July 14, thousands of Peruvians observed the first general strike in five years. The one-day strike was meant as an ultimatum to President Alejandro Toledo to either change his government's economic policies or resign.

Thousands of strikers marched through the streets of Lima carrying flags and cardboard images of Toledo and chanting "Out with Toledo!" They rallied near Peru's Government House. In a Lima slum, strikers fought police, and the effects of police tear gas canisters injured several protesters, including two infant children.

Protest marches took place throughout Peru. In southern Peru, Aymara Indians blocked highway passes into Bolivia. In the southern city of Arequipa, an image of Toledo was shot and then burnt in effigy.

The Toledo administration disputes the impact of the strike, calling it a "normal day." However, the strike organizers indicated widespread support. "It was an impressive strike," declared Mario Huaman, president of the Peruvian Workers Central (CGTP). "The government denies it because it insists on policies that the entire country rejects." The CGTP is demanding a turn away from the economic policy of privatizations and an increase in wages for Peruvian workers.

Toledo's popular support, according to recent polls, is in the single digits. His administration is riddled with unemployment and corruption scandals, and more than 14 million of Peru's 28 million inhabitants live in dire poverty.

Mexican copper miners strike

Two thousand Mexican workers at the La Caridad copper mine and smelter went on strike July 12. At issue are contract changes that include profit sharing and overtime pay. The smelter and mine are located in the state of Sonora in northern Mexico, near the US state of Arizona, where 750 copper miners at the Asarco mine have also threatened to strike. The mine is a major source of copper and molybdenum ores, while the smelter processes copper from Caridad and from nearby Cananea mine.

Both mines belongs to Grupo Mexico, a transnational producer of copper, silver and other minerals. Management is petitioning the government of Vicente Fox to declare the

strike illegal and is demanding the workers return to work.

At Cananea, the miners have threatened to join the strike this week. A strike at both installations would have a significant impact on world copper prices at a time when world inventories for the metal are low. Cananea and La Caridad together represent the second-largest source of copper in the world.

Costa Rican air traffic controllers' strike declared illegal

A labor court in Costa Rica declared illegal a month-long strike by air traffic controllers. The strikers are demanding implementation of a 35 percent wage increase that had been agreed to by the government in 1994.

Public health personnel launch new strike in the Dominican Republic

On January 15, public health workers in the Dominican Republic announced a strike of indefinite duration, in the wake of failed negotiations with the government of Hipolito Mejia over wages. Doctors, nurses and hospital employees are demanding a 100 percent raise. On July 5 and 6, the workers had struck for 48 hours.

Mejia has called the strikers "blackmailers" and rejects any proposal to increase their wages. He denies the hospitals are in crisis and announced that all public hospitals are fully stocked with medical supplies.

Thousands protest in Brazil over anemic economy

Thousands of workers marched in São Paulo on July 16 to protest unemployment in Brazil. The demonstrators demanded that President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva change the country's economic policy. Other marches took place in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia.

Despite official claims that the Brazilian economy is growing, albeit at an anemic rate of 2.7 percent, the official unemployment rate continues to be high, about 12 percent of the nation's workforce.

United States

Montana miners strike over pensions

Workers at the Stillwater Mining Company's operations in Montana rejected a tentative agreement and struck the only producer of palladium and platinum in the United States. According to the company, the rejected three-year contract came with annual 3 percent wage increases and was strongly

endorsed by the leadership of the Paper, Allied Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International union (PACE) Local 8-0001.

Brad Shorey, president of Pace Local 8-0001, declined to describe the issues that led workers to reject the agreement, except to say that the main demand was “the desire of employees to have a pension.” The work stoppage affects more than 850 workers at Stillwater’s processing operations in Columbus and a mine near Nye.

Actors’ Equity governing council to vote on tentative settlement

The governing council of Actors’ Equity, the union representing stage actors, is scheduled to decide this Thursday, July 22, whether to recommend to its membership either acceptance or rejection of the tentative settlement with the Broadway producers. The union will then mail out ballots, probably this Monday, July 22, to about 6,000 actors who have been involved in a Broadway or national tour production in the last eight years. The actors then have around three weeks to return their ballots. The executive board of the League of American of American Theaters and Producers will also be meeting this week to either accept or reject the tentative agreement. The old contract expired on June 27.

Although the union’s council can vote to advise the actors to reject the negotiated deal, this is considered highly unlikely. It is likewise expected that the producers’ executive board will vote to accept the contract. Although both sides are still working on finalizing the language of the agreement, it is not anticipated that this will create any difficulty in producing a completed document.

The producers won their major demand that they be able to reduce the wages of Equity actors on road tours. This has been achieved with the establishment of a multi-tiered wage system that will pay actors on national tour significantly less than actors performing on Broadway. However, actors on tour will receive greater compensation depending on how commercially well the show does. The union is hoping that this scheme will increase the number of union actors that the producers employ in road shows. Executives have dramatically increased their hiring of nonunion actors for national tours in the last 10 years. According to one estimate, union actors have worked 40 percent less on the road in the past five years.

Furthermore, according to a joint statement issued by both the producers and the union, the executives obtained greater flexibility in their ability to promote their plays on various outlets such as the Internet. The actors will get an annual 3 percent raise over the four-year contract. The producers have agreed to certain protocols that should increase the actors’ safety while performing on stage. Many actors are called

upon to take considerable risks while performing because of either the stage design or the costumes they are required to wear. The producers have also agreed to increase their contributions to the health benefits fund administered by the union, which, due to a lack of steady employment, is in dire straits. Only last year, the Equity health plan lost \$16 million.

Talks to resume at San Francisco Macy’s after one-day strike

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union and negotiators for Macy’s West are scheduled to resume talks this week following a one-day strike July 17 by more than 1,500 workers at the company’s Union Square and Stonestown stores in San Francisco. Workers are demanding improvements in wages, health care and the current sick policy.

Macy’s brought in 1,000 headquarter employees to replace workers during the work stoppage. The five-year agreement between the company and the UFCW expired May 31. The two San Francisco stores are the only unionized facilities in Macy West’s 144-store chain.

Canada

Talks break off at Aliant

Talks have broken off at Aliant Inc., Atlantic Canada’s largest telecommunications company, where 4,300 workers have been on strike for nearly three months, since April 23. An increasing number of the workers, who are represented by the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP), have been reportedly seeking out part-time work to survive. The two sides remain far apart on health benefits, pension benefits and wages, and on the issue of contracting out. No further talks are scheduled.

West Nipissing municipal workers may strike

Sixty-seven municipal hydro, water and waste workers in West Nipissing, Ontario, will be in a legal strike position as of July 29. The main issues in the dispute are privatization and protection of the bargaining unit’s work. The workers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 535, voted 98 percent in favor of strike action if an acceptable deal was not reached.



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