

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 July 2004

## Latin America

### Football players strike in Uruguay

The Uruguayan Association of Professional Players (MUJP) decided to widen a month-long strike over back wages for football (soccer) players. The decision will affect the national team, which is scheduled to play Ecuador on September 5 as part of the 2006 World Cup. Also in September, last season's two top first division teams, Penarol and Danubio, are scheduled to begin playing for the South American cup.

The players decided to extend the strike to the national team at a meeting of two hundred players on July 24, following a meeting of team owners that rejected a compromise offered by the union. MUJP leaders hope that by extending the strike, they will pressure management into addressing the workers' demands. Second-division players make as little as \$50 a week.

So far the walkout has only had an effect on the first division and second division soccer leagues.

### Puerto Rican water utility workers vote to strike

On July 24 3,000 workers, members of the Authentic Independent Union (UIA) in Puerto Rico, unanimously approved strike authorization for water and sewer workers, who are attempting to pressure management into resolving a conflict over medical benefits. In the current round of negotiations management is proposing to replace the medical plan that the workers now enjoy for one, Triple S, that provides unreliable coverage.

UIA members walked off their jobs and will not return until this Wednesday.

Triple S was the health care provider for these workers in 1975, when it went bankrupt, leaving them with no medical coverage.

### Mexican copper miners defy back to work order

Union workers at the La Caridad mine in the state of Sonora have rejected the intervention by the Mexican government and decided to continue their strike against Grupo Mexico, the world's third largest producer of copper.

On July 22 a miners' assembly rejected the government order and decided not to return to work. At issue are contract violations by Grupo Mexico.

Mexican law requires strikers to take down their picket signs and return to work within 24 hours once the government intervenes against a strike. The miners' union indicated that the back-to-work order is proof of complicity between the government of Vicente Fox and Grupo Mexico.

The two thousand union members at La Caridad walked off their jobs on July 12.

At the nearby Cananea mine, workers will vote this week on whether or not to join the walkout. Together the two mines constitute the second-largest copper reserve in the world.

The Fox government also issued back-to-work orders to striking miners in Nacozari and San Luis Potosi. An assembly of miners will decide whether or not to go back to work. Miners are also on strike at the Agua Prieta mine.

Union leaders have declared that they find Grupo Mexico's attitude capricious, since the workers' demands at all the affected mines are the equivalent of less than one day's loss in profits due to the strike.

### Mexican workers protest attacks on social benefits

On Friday, July 23, tens of thousands of employees of the Mexican Social Security Institute (INSS) and their supporters (electricians, communications workers, etc.) took to the streets in a massive demonstration against draft legislation that attacks their pension benefits and includes increasing employee contributions, raising the retirement age and the number of years that must be worked. The legislation is a joint effort of Mexico's major political parties, the Party of the Democratic Revolution, (PRD), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the ruling Authentic National Party (PAN.)

Protests also took place in Veracruz, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Toluca, Merida, Culiacan and Chihuahua. In Mexico the Social Security Institute manages the country's public health system.

During the march, which lasted three hours, the workers denounced both the PRI and PAN, and promised that the reforms would not go through. Many carried signs calling for a national strike.

However, Roberto Vega Galina, the general secretary of the union that represents the Social Security employees, the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS), presented to the Mexican congress a so-called long term alternative, which—while protecting current workers—sells out the pension rights of future employees.

Under the union plan, workers would have to remain on the job 35 years to qualify for a pension, up from the current 28 years. The age of retirement would be raised to 60, the contributions of the 300,000 Social Security employees would increase from three to six percent of wages and the pension itself would be cut by 17 percent.

Friday's massive protests brought together medical and

administrative personnel of the INSS as well as private sector workers, whose pensions over the years have been seriously downgraded.

### **United States**

#### **NLRB decision bars unionization by graduate students**

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) voted last week that teaching and research assistants at Brown University are students, not workers, and therefore not eligible for union representation by the United Auto Workers. By extension, the new precedent will apply to all private universities and give administrations a new weapon to back up the widespread policy of using assistants as a form of cheap labor on college campuses.

The 3-2 vote by the Republican-controlled NLRB reversed a decision of four years ago, when a then Democratic-dominated board ruled that increased responsibilities of graduate students at New York University permitted them to become the first students to affiliate to a union. **Quarry workers strike expanded in California**

Some 220 workers represented by the Operating Engineers Local 3 walked off the job July 19, joining other striking workers at the Graniterock Company's quarries and operation divisions in the Monterey and San Francisco Bay areas. The strike has been provoked by Graniterock's proposal to insert contract language into a new labor agreement that prohibits workers' right to strike.

The company and union negotiators also failed to agree on wages and issues dealing with the grievance procedure. The union has also charged that the company pulled out of tentative agreements reached in earlier negotiations. In all, about 420 workers have gone on strike.

The walkout first began back on June 9 when 20 members of the Teamsters union in San Jose struck after the company proposed a wage package that was \$3 per hour less than the rate of workers at other locations in Silicon Valley. Other unions involved in the labor dispute are the International Association of Machinists and the Laborers Union.

### **Canada**

#### **Strike at National Arts Centre in Ottawa**

On July 23 about 70 security, parking and maintenance workers commenced a strike at the National Arts Centre (NAC) in Ottawa, after conciliation hearings broke off July 19. The workers, represented by Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), voted unanimously to strike. The main issue is wages, which for years have not kept pace with inflation. The workers are also concerned about the NAC's willingness to employ strike-breakers.

#### **Workers at Bell Canada to vote on offer**

Strike action by 7,000 technicians at Bell Canada has been postponed until the workers vote on a new offer put forward by the company on July 21. The workers, who rejected the company's previous offer in a vote, had been set to begin strike action as of 4 PM July 22. The workers' union, the

Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), is reportedly recommending that its members reject the contract offer. Results of the vote are not expected until mid-August. The main issues are wages and the structure of the pension plan.

#### **York Region Children's Aid Society employees could strike**

About 210 workers at the York Region Children's Aid Society (Toronto) could go on strike August 11. Following two days of unsuccessful mediation, the workers voted to reject their employer's last offer and authorize strike action. The main issues in the contract dispute are wages, harassment language and the term of the agreement. The workers are demanding five, four and three percent pay increases over the next three years, arguing that this is necessary for the wages to be comparable to those in other children's aid societies in the province.

They are also seeking contractual language to deal with incidents of intimidation, coercion and favouritism in the workplace. The workers are members of Local 304 of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), and have been without a contract since March 31.

#### **Wal-mart certification hearings temporarily halted**

Legal maneuvers by Wal-Mart have temporarily halted certification hearings relating to a union drive at the giant chain's outlet in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, where a majority of workers have signed cards to join the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). During certification hearings, Wal-Mart was subpoenaed for training materials used to counter union organizing, after a company manager testified that such materials exist.

The retail firm responded by launching a case before the Saskatchewan Court of Queen's Bench arguing that the Trade Union Act's restrictions on employers' ability to communicate with employees during a union drive are unconstitutional. Certification hearings have been postponed until August 17, pending the decision by the Court of Queen's Bench.



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