

Workers struggles: The Americas

18 August 2004

Latin America

Brazilian bank workers on strike

Four thousand six hundred employees of the Central Bank in Brazil began a national strike on Monday, August 9. The workers are demanding a 23 percent pay increase. Negotiations broke down last week after four months of meetings between the workers' union, SINAL, and bank authorities.

Management has offered a 23 percent raise to be paid out in three installments: 30 percent in September, followed by 20 percent in April and 50 percent in June 2005. The SINAL president declared that the union would not accept less than a two-installment plan consisting of an immediate 70 percent raise, followed by 30 percent early next year.

Costa Rican trade unions attempt to form broad coalition

Leaders of the United Federation of Workers and Teachers (CUSIMA) are seeking to form a coalition with other social and labor groups in response to the economic and social policies of the Costa Rican government. The federation is also opposed to the impending signing of a free trade agreement between Costa Rica and the United States.

CUSIMA is a new organization that claims to represent 70 percent of the country's union locals. It has called on workers and other citizens to attend a workshop on August 18 to prepare an indefinite national strike.

Argentine minister denounces the unemployed

On August 14, one day after unemployed workers picketed and blocked streets in the city of Buenos Aires, Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez told the unemployed to "stop protesting, stop bothering people and go to work" in the country's underground economy. "Even if it is not a genuine job," said Fernandez in a radio interview, "they could form cooperatives, or start a garden, or work baking bread. ... They must labor, this is what they must do, and stop

bothering with demonstrations."

The August 13 protest demanded jobs, financial assistance and expressed support for Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Currently, Argentina is suffering from record levels of poverty (46 percent) and unemployment (14.4 percent).

Street people protest in Mexico City

Over 1,000 street sweepers, hawkers, beggars and prostitutes protested on August 11 in central Mexico City against the enforcement of regulations barring their presence. Former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who is advising city authorities, was instrumental in developing the new "quality of life" program.

Giuliani was hired as a high-priced consultant to the city in 2002 and has made some 146 recommendations for the supposed purpose of reducing petty crime.

Under the Civic Cultural Ordinance, police are harassing street musicians and other performers, as well as windshield cleaners and youth who are given money to watch over people's unattended vehicles.

The demonstrators carried signs demanding jobs and an end to police harassment.

City authorities boast that over 3,000 people have been arrested and fined under the new program, and have no intention of halting its implementation.

Mexican oil workers fired trying to start an independent union

Fifty-one oil workers at Mexico's state oil company, PEMEX, were fired last week when they tried to register as an independent union of clerical employees.

In several cases, soldiers were summoned to escort the workers from their workplaces. The bulk of the employees had between 20 and 30 years seniority.

The case is now before the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IHRC). Local authorities in Villahermosa, State of Tabasco, ruled that the workers

had been illegally fired.

Despite the ruling, PEMEX has refused to rehire the victimized workers, who report that the oil giant has launched a witch-hunt inside the company aimed at intimidating white-collar employees to discourage them from joining the union and from opposing plans to privatize the company.

United States

Teamsters strike Connecticut company over health insurance and pensions

Teamsters walked off the job at Moskowitz Motor Transportation's truck terminal in Plainfield, Connecticut, after the company failed to pay monthly contributions to the union's health, welfare and pension benefits. According to Teamsters Local 493, Moskowitz has failed to pay the \$1,600 monthly, per-worker fee for the last six months.

About one dozen drivers and dock workers are involved in the dispute, which could result in workers losing their health insurance by November 5. According to the Teamsters, another Moskowitz terminal in New Jersey is slated to be struck over the same issues.

Lockout continues at Minnesota sugar beet processing plant

The lockout of 250 workers at the Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative has entered its third week with no talks scheduled or any sign of resolution. Workers soundly rejected a tentative agreement on July 26 that increased health insurance costs. Three days later, Coop management locked out workers following an ultimatum to accept the contract. Wages at the plant, near Renville, Minnesota, average US\$18 an hour.

Canada

National strike at Parks Canada

Some 4,800 Parks Canada employees nationwide went on strike August 13 after negotiations broke down the previous day. The union representing the workers, Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), is demanding a wage increase of about 13 percent over a three-year period. This would reduce a wage gap of two percent between Parks Canada workers and their counterparts in both the public and private sectors. The employer's final offer was four percent. There also remain other issues such as working conditions and workplace safety.

The strikers have so far allowed access to

campgrounds and parks, with admission fees waived and no campground service being offered. The union has said it is prepared to employ a variety of tactics, up to and including a general strike, if a deal isn't reached. Patty Ducharme, West Coast spokesperson for the PSAC, said that the strike by Parks Canada workers could be just the beginning. More than 135,000 PSAC members employed by the federal government, Canada Revenue Agency, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency may join the strike action in the coming weeks.

Strike by home care workers in Newfoundland

About 60 home care workers employed by the Victoria Order of Nurses (VON) in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, have been on strike since August 2 demanding improved wages, vacation time and sick leave benefits. The striking workers provide care for the elderly and people with disabilities. Their union, Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees, (NAPE/NUPGE) recently organized another 1,500 home care workers across the province and are currently preparing to negotiate a first contract. They are hoping to reach a deal with the VON in Corner Brook that can set the pattern for future contracts.

Health care workers on strike in York Region

Ninety-two health care workers at Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) in York Region in Newmarket, Ontario, north of Toronto, walked off the job August 6, rejecting wage concessions demanded by their employer. The workers, who are employed in three CCAC offices, include team assistants, service coordinators, case managers, payroll and accounting staff, information technology specialists, information and referral specialists, and receptionists. They are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Local 905.



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