

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 September 2004

Park ranger strike in the Galapagos Islands

A strike by park rangers at the Galapagos Island National Park is now on its second week. On September 10, the 300 rangers began a sit-down strike at the Galapagos Islands National Park. The strikers are concerned over the two-month rotations of park managers since 2003.

The current conflict began when Fausto Cepeda, a political appointment by Ecuadorian President Lucio Gutierrez, replaced biologist Edwin Naula. The move is part of Gutierrez plan to create fisheries in the waters of the islands, with its consequent environmental damage.

The strike is being prolonged by the Gutierrez administration's insistence that negotiations take place in Quito, Ecuador's capital, rather than on this archipelago on the Pacific Ocean. The deadlock is affecting tourism in the region.

Mexico City firefighters threaten to strike

Antonio Peregrino, leader of the Heroic Firefighters Corps Union (SHCB) announced that Mexico City's firefighters would walk out on September 22 unless municipal authorities approve a draft collective bargaining agreement.

A meeting is scheduled for September 20 between SHCB negotiators and the city at the offices of the city's Arbitration and Conciliation Board. Peregrino indicated that unless the city negotiators show up to either sign the draft or seriously negotiate, the firefighters will refuse to negotiate further and prepare to walk out this Wednesday at noon.

The SHCB draft proposal calls for a 20 percent wage increase and includes improvement on job security and firefighter training. It is similar to one that the city refused to sign a year ago. For that reason, Peregrino indicated that there was no need to begin negotiations at square one. The SHCB represents 800 firefighters.

In the event of a strike, firefighters will only respond to fires, gas leaks and traffic accidents.

Mexican public employee unions to strike

The Union-Rural Popular and Social Front (FSCSP), composed of health care, telephone and electrical utility unions, announced on September 17 that it is prepared to launch a national strike over reforms to public employee pensions.

The FSCSP plans a mass march in defense of pension rights in Guadalajara on September 30. Last month, the Mexican legislature passed a law that severely curtails public health workers' pensions. State-owned utility and state-owned telephone employees' pensions are likely to be cut as well.

Electrical union leader Rosendo Flores indicated that the FSCSP plans to mobilize across Mexico, launching caravans of workers to carry the protests from city to city. Flores also raised other demands being presented by the front, such as greater democracy and rights for rural workers.

Brazilian bank workers strike

Bank workers went on strike in Brazil on September 15. The strike began in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia and Florianópolis. By Friday, it had extended to many other cities in 18 of Brazil's 27 states. Two hundred thousand bank employees have joined the strike so far.

The strike took place despite a contract agreement between the National Bank Workers Federation (CNB) and the employers' organization, the Brazilian Bank Federation (FENABAN). That agreement included an 8 percent wage increase. A dissident group within the CNB called for rejection of the agreement and organized the walkout.

The bank employees are demanding a 25 percent wage increase and a yearly Rs1,200 (US\$400) profit-sharing bonus.

Brazilian metal workers to strike this week

The Powerful ABC metal workers union decided September 18 to launch a strike in São Paulo on Monday, September 20. The metal workers would join the 200,000 bank employees on strike since last week.

The metal workers are demanding that negotiations begin this month over wages in the machine-producing and electrical sector, among ironworkers and in foundries. Together, these industries employ 40,000 workers. They are calling for wage increases of 4 percent in addition to compensation for lost purchasing power due to inflation. The ABC is also demanding a limit on mandatory overtime.

The 280,000 metal workers of the Sindical Force (FS) are set to march this Tuesday in São Paulo to petition for a 15 percent wage increase, a productivity bonus and a reduction in working hours.

Also on Friday September 17, 100,000 chemical employees, members of the Oil Workers Federation (FUP) in São Paulo state, voted to fight for a 13 percent wage increase.

US Airways to seek court-imposed pay cuts

Plans by US Airways to get a federal bankruptcy judge to impose temporary pay cuts on its workforce were leaked last week in advance of the airline's second trip to bankruptcy court for legal protection after it failed to get \$800 million in annual wage and benefit concessions from its workforce.

In its previous trip to bankruptcy court, US Airways was able to secure \$1.9 billion a year in wage cuts. But higher oil prices, increased competition from low-fare airlines and the slowdown in air travel have kept its operations in debt.

The current plan for temporary pay cuts will reportedly be unveiled when the airline appears before a bankruptcy judge on October 7. Should that plan fail, the airline is rumored to be preparing a broader motion for as early as October 14 under which it would tear up current labor agreements and replace them with cheaper pacts. These measures would only be withdrawn if airline unions agree to work with management to impose reductions in workers' living standards.

Los Angeles hotel locks out laundry workers

The Wilshire Grand hotel in Los Angeles locked out laundry workers of UNITE Local 52 on September 16 after the union persisted in its demand for a two-year pact as opposed to a long-term agreement sought by owners.

The lockout is the beginning of what could become a broader struggle of some 10,000 members of UNITE and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) who are negotiating with hotels in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., that include the Starwood, Resorts Worldwide and Hyatt properties. Both the HERE and UNITE are pressing for two-year agreements that are opposed by hotel owners.

Atlantic City Casino workers demonstrate

Some 5,000 Atlantic City casino workers held a mass demonstration along the city's waterfront on September 16 to show their unity in the current contract talks, chanting, "No contract! No peace!" Local 54 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union, which represents 17,000 workers, is upset by the fact that nonunion workers have staffed the new expansion of the Tropicana restaurant facility.

Workers have voted authorization to strike, but no actions have been taken. Over the weekend, Atlantic City played host to the Miss America Pageant.

Sons of Chicago union bureaucrats in work application scandal

The sons of two Carpenters Union bureaucrats resigned as building inspectors after it became public that they had falsified their work histories to get the \$49,548-a-year positions. Kevin Sexton, 23, son of Carpenters Union president Mike Sexton, and Andy Ryan, 19, son of secretary-treasurer Tom Ryan, obtained the positions based on fabricated work records that were given verbal backing by the union.

Mayor Richard Daley has publicly chastised Buildings Commissioner Stan Kaderbek for failing to verify the work history claims and awarding the positions to Sexton and Ryan. The city is currently seeking a maximum fine of \$500 against both individuals.

Aliant strike ends

Forty-three hundred employees on strike against Atlantic Canada's largest telecommunications company, Aliant, voted

76 percent to accept the new deal on September 16, ending a strike that began April 23. The workers are represented by Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) and the Atlantic Communication & Technical Workers Union (ACTWU).

The new six-year contract includes retroactive wage increases of 2.5 percent for 2002, 2003 and 2004, an increase of 3.0 percent next year and 2.8 percent in the two remaining years. In addition, it includes a voluntary retirement program open to a maximum of 500 unionized employees.

Not all workers were happy with the deal. In the provinces of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, some benefits negotiated before the four Atlantic provinces' phone companies amalgamated in 1999 to form Aliant were lost. Also, CEP union official Chuck Shewfelt admitted that many workers in Newfoundland and Labrador are not happy with the agreement because of provisions for contracting out and inadequate wage parity.

New Brunswick hospital workers vote to strike

In New Brunswick, 6,500 hospital workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1252, voted 95.8 percent in favor of strike action. The workers, who include practical nurses and maintenance, kitchen and clerical staff, are demanding a 27 percent raise over three years, while the government is offering only 3 percent over four years. The strike vote took place on September 17, and the workers will be in a legal strike position on September 24.

The last strike of the hospital workers was in 2001, and only when the government threatened to legislate them back to work. The union is threatening a province-wide strike if the government tries to use back-to-work legislation again.

Toronto school support staff works to rule

More than 12,000 school support workers began a work-to-rule campaign on September 15 with the purpose of pressuring Toronto's public school board to increase staffing levels. During the campaign, the support staff will no longer work unpaid hours and have been instructed not to attend unpaid meetings, to take all entitled breaks, and to take overtime in pay instead of paid time off.

The workers, who include office staff, caretakers, adult education instructors, educational assistants, hall monitors and lunchroom supervisors, and who are represented by the CUPE, have been without a collective agreement for almost a year.



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