

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 September 2004

## Latin America

### Salvadorans protest against sending troops to Iraq

Thousands of Salvadorans marched on August 28 in San Salvador to protest the use of Salvadoran soldiers in Iraq. The demonstration included teachers, students and peasants, and was led by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). In the face of widespread opposition to the use of troops from El Salvador in Iraq, newly elected President Tony Saca has sent a third military contingent to Iraq.

Demonstrators at the rally also denounced El Salvador's high cost of living and the government's imposition of new age restrictions on pensions.

### Mexican workers protest deaths at the border

Scores of former Mexican agricultural workers, retired from working in US fields, protested on August 27 in Guadalajara against the repression of immigrants at the US-Mexico border.

The demonstrators placed 301 crosses around this city's main cathedral, one for each migrant that has died crossing into the United States since 2002. Each cross had information on the migrant and on the manner of his or her death. The major causes of death were drowning in the Bravo River and dehydration. Other causes of death included bullet wounds and venomous animal bites. According to some estimates, more than 300,000 undocumented Mexicans cross the border to work in the United States.

### Costa Rican truckers strike

On August 23, Costa Rican truckers went on strike against new inspection requirements for their vehicles. Striking drivers blocked highways and the nation's main ports. Throughout the week, the drivers battled police attempting to lift their barricades. Other unions joined the strikers on August 26 in solidarity with the drivers. Utility workers, Social Security employees, students and taxi drivers rallied in support of the strikers in San Jose on the same day.

The drivers rejected a government contract with a

Spanish transnational company, Riteve, to perform the inspections.

The drivers are also demanding a wage increase, the rejection of the free trade treaty with the United States, and an end to the rounds of price increases that have affected basic necessities and services. On August 28, the truckers agreed to negotiate with the government.

### Peruvian miners threaten to strike

Fifteen hundred miners employed by the Southern Peru Copper Corporation at the Toquepala and Cuajone mines near the Peru-Chile border have threatened to strike August 31 if the company is taken over by its biggest shareholder, Grupo Mexico. The miners are also asking for a wage increase.

Grupo Mexico owns several Mexican mines, including La Caridad Cananea mine in Sonora State, scenes of recent strikes by Mexican miners.

Miners' union leader Elmer Gallegos claims that Cananea and La Caridad have \$800 million in debts, and that Southern Peru's profits would be used to pay off that debt. Grupo Mexico already owns 54.2 percent of Southern's shares. Gallegos gave an indication that the miners would accept the merger in exchange for increased compensation.

### United States

#### Strike by health care workers ends without settlement

More than 1,000 health care workers are still without a contract after a five-day strike against Group Health, a Seattle health care cooperative. The contract struggle, involving up to 1,700 nurses and other workers represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199NW, was sparked by Group Health's attempt to make workers pay premiums and deductibles for the first time.

Workers currently pay only a \$5 co-payment for office visits. Group Health wants to raise co-pays to \$15 while establishing premium payments based on whether an employee is single or married or has family

dependents. A worker making \$35,000 with a family would have to pay \$75 a month under management's present proposal.

Currently, no talks are scheduled between Group Health and the SEIU. Workers at Group Health last struck the cooperative in 1995, walking out on a one-day strike. In 1989, the union carried out a 38-day strike.

### **Strike by Ohio sugar beet workers continues**

The strike by workers at a sugar beet plant in Ohio owned by Michigan Sugar is into its fourth week with no end in sight. Some 20 members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, Local 294G walked out over the company's demand for increased co-payments that will add \$10 to medications, \$10 for generics and \$40 for name-brand drugs. The union charges the added medical costs will erase any gains from the company's wage offer.

The 20 workers have spread their strike to four plants in Michigan where workers are honoring roving picket lines, bringing Michigan Sugar's operations to a halt as the fall sugar beet harvest appears on the horizon. While the union insists its shutdown of the company's Michigan operations is legal under their contract, Michigan Sugar has filed a complaint with the NLRB hoping to force an end to the strike on the grounds that the Ohio workers operate under a separate agreement from those workers in Michigan.

### **Canada**

#### **Niagara Institute strike ends**

The strike by 13 Niagara Institute workers in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, ended August 25. The workers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1287 who perform critical program support, clerical and purchasing functions, had been on strike since June 7. The deal includes a 6.8 percent wage increase over three-and-a-half years and a signing bonus.

#### **Thorhild nursing home staff vote for strike**

Eighteen nursing home attendants employed at Newthorad Seniors' Lodge in Thorhild, a town north of Edmonton, Alberta, voted 75 percent to strike August 23, after trying for more than 12 months to get a first collective agreement. The key issues are seniority and job-posting rights: employees, who are members of CUPE, are asking that if layoffs occur, they are done in

reverse order of seniority. They also want the first chance on any job postings for which they are qualified.

### **Strike likely at Carleton University in Ottawa**

Talks broke down August 20 between 650 administrative, technical and support staff at Carleton University in Ottawa and the university administration. The issues are a reduction in pension benefits, dental benefits for retired employees and excessive workload. The support staff could walk out the first day of school, September 9. The workers are represented by CUPE Local 2424.

### **Workers at Lakeside Packers to join union**

Twenty-two hundred workers at Lakeside Packers in Brooks, Alberta, have voted to certify Local 401 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) as their bargaining agent. The two-day vote was the third attempt by the UFCW to organize workers at the meatpacking company. Lakeside Packers, owned by US-based conglomerate Tyson Foods, is one of three Alberta meatpacking operations that were able to take advantage of the BSE crisis in order to make off with close to four times their normal profit.



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