

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 October 2004

Latin America

Port workers strike in northern Chile

Five hundred temporary workers at the port of Iquique in northern Chile went on strike October 5 demanding wage increases. Most of the workers involved in the strike were stevedores.

The strike ended October 23. An agreement was reached under the threat of a national strike scheduled for this week. The stevedores' union was also threatening to organize an international boycott of Chilean cargo.

When the shipping companies attempted to divert cargo to other ports, workers at the other ports refused to handle the cargo in solidarity with the Iquique strikers.

At issue was a US\$2.50 increase per shift for each worker—a 7.5 percent raise. Currently, Iquique stevedores earn US\$33 per shift. The strikers also demanded improved working conditions.

The port of Iquique, one of the most important in Chile, is a major site for exports such as fish, fruit and minerals.

Mexican copper strike

Workers at the two largest copper mines in Mexico returned to work this week following an agreement with the Mexican transnational company Grupo Mexico. The strike was lifted once management agreed to transfer to the employees 5 percent of the mines' worth. The money had been owed to the miners since the mines were privatized 15 years ago.

Paraguayan nurses strike

Nurses at Asuncion's Clinicas Hospital went on strike last week demanding that the government pay for benefits owed to the workers. The strikers also demanded the resignation of top officials at the government-run hospital.

The one-week strike began with a rally outside the hospital. The dean of the hospital, Adolfo Cattoni, was denounced for corruption, alcoholism and shirking.

Cattoni was hung in effigy from a tree in front of the hospital.

The struggle at Clinicas Hospital began in September 2003, after the Paraguayan government and hospital management agreed to compensate nurses for hazardous working conditions and work on Sundays and holidays, and to provide various benefits for employees' families. The government had budgeted 5.5 million guaranies (US\$873,000) for this purpose, but the money was never paid out.

On the first day of the strike, Clinicas's doctors walked out for 24 hours in a show of solidarity with the nurses.

The strike ended last Friday, when the Paraguayan government agreed to begin paying the promised benefits.

As a result of soaring hospital costs, thousands of Paraguayan women cannot afford to give birth at a hospital. Paraguay has the highest rate of maternal deaths from complications of childbirth on the continent.

United States

Negotiations reopen in Chicago City Colleges strike

The union representing 750 striking full-time faculty members and negotiators for Chicago's City Colleges reopened negotiations October 24 for the first time since the strike began six days earlier. The previous contract expired in June. Since that time, the two sides have failed to come to an agreement on wages, health care, workloads or class sizes.

The strike has impacted classes for some 60,000 students at seven area campuses. When the strike broke out, the Chicago Police Department suspended a long-time order that barred off-duty police officers from moonlighting as security guards during a labor dispute.

City Colleges Board Chairman Jim Tyree defended the use of police, who make up two thirds of the security contingent, claiming it was necessary to

guarantee student safety. The president of the City Colleges student body has called on students to not attend classes.

Illinois power workers wildcat over forced overtime

Some 330 workers who provide electrical and gas service for AmerenCILCO in central Illinois walked off their jobs October 20 to protest the company's unilateral implementation of a mandatory overtime policy. Last month, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 51 rejected a contract that contained the forced overtime policy. Despite this, the company followed up by implementing the contract on October 11.

The leadership of the IBEW says it was not aware of the impending actions of rank-and-file workers. The international leadership of the IBEW ordered the workers back to work after one day on the picket line. The strike affected AmerenCILCO workers in Peoria, Lincoln, Springfield and Tuscola.

Computer makers announce "code of conduct"

Hewlett-Packard, IBM and Dell announced a new "code of conduct" for the ostensible purpose of ameliorating sweatshop working conditions and reduce environmental hazards. Last January, the non-profit British-based Catholic Agency for Overseas Development published a report asserting that workers who manufactured computer components for the three companies were suffering "atrocious conditions for extremely low pay."

The code has sections on labor, health and safety, the environment, management systems and ethics. The labor standards section contains language that prohibits forced, bonded, child or indentured labor. It also bars inhumane treatment and stipulates that minimum-wage laws and overtime and benefits rules must be observed. According to Hewlett-Packard, the new code will be enforced through audits.

Canada

Quebec City bus drivers on strike

More than 700 bus drivers with Quebec City public transit walked out October 23 after contract negotiations broke off at 3:30 that morning. The main issue in the dispute is wages, which the union says are well behind those of bus drivers in Montreal. The union is demanding increases in wages totaling C\$3,500 a year per driver.

Transit workers in Quebec City have been working without a contract for 15 months. The last Quebec City bus drivers' strike was in 1999 and lasted only three hours.

New Brunswick hospital workers' strike ends

Some 800 New Brunswick hospital workers employed in housekeeping, food services, laundry and laboratories voted October 19 to accept the latest government offer, ending a strike that lasted almost four weeks. The new contract gives them a 12.6 percent wage increase over four years.

More than 6,500 workers in the province of New Brunswick, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), were in a legal strike position, but the union limited the walkout to only two hospitals. The new contract was ratified by a majority of only 56 percent. Workers had been led to expect a bigger settlement after New Brunswick nurses got a 24 percent increase over four years after a strike that ended in September.



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