Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 October 2004

Latin America

Chilean health workers demand back pay

The National Confederation of Municipal Health Employees (CONFUSAM) announced on October 17 that its members would mobilize to press for back pay. The CONFUSAM president said one municipality, Ercilla, owed $55,000 in back pay to its 38 health workers, who have not been paid for 17 days.

Mexican copper miners on strike

Ten thousand Mexican copper miners at the Cananea mine in Sonora State went on strike on October 16 in response to management's refusal to transfer to the workers five percent of the company's shares in violation of a 15-year-old agreement.

Leaders of the National Union of Miners, Metal workers and Similar Workers (SNTMMS) explained that 15 years ago, as the plant was being privatized, the owners of Grupo Mexico, the company that now owns the plant, promised the shares. Now management insists on giving workers what the shares were worth fifteen years ago.

The Cananea mine is one of the biggest copper mines in the world, and Mexico's second biggest. In addition to copper, it also produces silver and gold.

Teachers strike in Argentina

Teachers in Argentina's most populated and richest province, Buenos Aires, went on a 24-hour strike on October 15. The teachers are demanding higher wages and an increase in the education budget for the province. The teachers' union has announced that a 48-hour walkout will take place on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week.

Joining the teachers on the second strike will be public health doctors, court employees and provincial administrative employees.

Part of the October 15 strike was a massive march through the streets of La Plata, the provincial capital, and a rally across from the state government building. Union leaders announced that strikes will rapidly escalate if their demands are not adequately addressed by the government.

While the provincial government is now promising more money for schools and public health, those funds will not be used for wage increases.

Paraguayan teachers campaign for more school funds

As the school year winds down in Paraguay, teachers are aggressively lobbying for a higher budget in Paraguay and threatening to strike.

On Friday October 15, teachers poured into Asuncion from all over Paraguay in a mass rally calling for higher wages, more milk for school children, and an improvement in other aspects of education.

At the rally, speakers declared that much of the money destined for education is diverted each year from schools to other administrative priorities.

Teachers also denounced union leaders who negotiated wage increases for full-time teachers in June, leaving out part-time teachers.

United States

Thousands rally in support of Atlantic City casino strikers

An estimated 10,000 casino and hotel strikers, and members of dozens of unions from New England, New York and Philadelphia, rallied in Atlantic City, New Jersey on Saturday in support of the walkout that began on October 1. Recording artist Wyclef Jean provided entertainment.

Although the mile-long march was peaceful, the workers ignored a court order that barred them from going onto the street. The protesters shut down a major road for two hours. As a result, the president of Local 54 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union, which represents the strikers, and two out-of-town union officials were arrested, charged with criminal contempt of court, and released late Saturday night.

Service workers such as waiters, bartenders, and

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housekeepers walked off their jobs more than two weeks ago against seven of the twelve casinos in Atlantic City. The major issues in the strike involve the length of the contract, wages and health benefits, and the outsourcing of jobs to non-union workers.

It appears that the most contentious issue is the union's demand for a three-year contract, whose expiration date would coincide with that of service workers in the Las Vegas casinos. The union is also seeking a shorter contract in order to limit the casinos' ability to hire non-union labor as they expand into non-gambling forms of entertainment. The casinos, which are negotiating as one bargaining unit, are adamantly opposed to this union demand and are looking for a five-year agreement.

Negotiations between the two sides took place on Friday for the first time since the strike began, but it has been reported that their meeting lasted for only 45 minutes, with both sides refusing to compromise on any of their respective positions.

In an earlier development, two strikers, one of whom, Alberto Camilo Pena, 43, suffered a broken kneecap as a result of a physical confrontation with security guards, have been fired. Pena, who was on picket duty, received his injury when he was tackled to the ground and handcuffed by security guards working for Bally's Casino. The guards assaulted the worker as he was running to inform a strike captain that the guards were filming the picket line. The police report that Pena has filed a complaint against the guards. The other worker has apparently been accused of knocking a camcorder out of the hands of one of the guards.

Judge imposes 21 percent wage cuts on airline workers

US Bankruptcy Court Judge Steven Mitchell ruled October 15 that US Airways could cut the wages of its 28,000 unionized workers by 21 percent, providing the airline with $33 million in savings per month until February 15, 2005, when the agreement expires. The reduction translates into an average annual reduction of pay from $59,509 to $47,012. The flight attendants' union said the cut would set its members back to 1982 wage levels.

US Airways, which is in bankruptcy court for the second time, originally asked for a wage cut of 23 percent through March. The airline's lead attorney, Brian P. Leitch, said the airline would need to obtain additional cuts twice the size of those awarded by Judge Mitchell for the airline to survive once the court-ordered pay-reduction period expires.

Members of the Air Line Pilots Union can avoid the 21 percent wage cut only by voting on October 21 to accept an agreement reached between the company and union that accepts an 18.5 percent cut, combined with further work rule and benefit concessions.

The court ruling also provides US Airways with the right to outsource machinists' work and increase the hours of pilots and flight attendants.

University of California laborers arrested in street protest

About 200 workers from the University of California (UC) campuses held a sit-down street demonstration over low wages at Berkeley, resulting in 16 arrests. "We want a fair contract, and we don't want to live in poverty," said UC Santa Cruz food service worker Julian Posadas, one of the arrested workers, to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The workers, members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, presented the media with a study by UC grad students that accused university management of indifference toward the workers. According to the union, about one fourth of UC's 7,000 custodians and service workers make less than $10 an hour.

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