

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 November 2004

Latin America

Argentine communications workers in protest strike

On November 3, more than 6,000 communications workers went on strike against Telecom and Telefonica Argentina, Argentina's communications monopolies.

Striking workers marched in downtown Buenos Aires to press their demand for a 25 percent wage increase. The strikers' other demands relate to job security, technological changes and the outsourcing of jobs.

Ceramic workers defend occupied plant

Workers occupying the Zanon ceramic plant in Neuquen province in Southwest Argentina issued a declaration that reports on government efforts to oust them from the plant and remove its machinery.

The workers took over the plant three years ago to forestall its closure. They have been operating it since then as a cooperative and are demanding that provincial and federal authorities legalize their cooperative. The Zanon occupation has won widespread support from workers in the province, and the community has mobilized to oppose previous government and employer attempts to seize the plant.

The communiqué points out that the provincial government subsidized the Zanon plant for years with public funds. On this basis, workers demand the right to occupy and operate the plant against what they describe as an "offensive lockout."

Neuquen Governor Jorge Sobish is now demanding that the plant machinery be removed and the plant auctioned off. The cooperative protested that this will leave another "empty factory on Route 7" and 450 families out of work. They have appealed for an international mobilization of workers to defend their right to run the plant.

Paraguayan teachers to strike this week

Paraguayan public school teachers will strike on Monday, October 8, for an indefinite period to press their demand for a 15 percent wage increase. The

teachers, members of the Federation of Paraguayan Educators (FEP), are protesting the government's refusal to carry out an agreement reached this June that promised to set up a higher wage schedule for all teachers.

The FEP is demanding a wage schedule that pays a minimum of 972,000 guaranis (US\$165). Currently, experienced teachers earn 758,000 guaranis.

Chilean copper miners strike

Four hundred workers at the El Abra copper mine, operated by the transnational firm Phelps Dodge, went on strike November 5 after the breakdown of wage negotiations.

El Abra management announced that it has a contingency plan that will allow it to continue processing the ore during the strike.

United States

Striking City Colleges of Chicago teachers vote on new agreement

Striking faculty members at City Colleges of Chicago voted over the weekend on a new four-year contract aimed at bringing the bitter three-week strike to a close and returning 60,000 students to class. The agreement was endorsed by the leadership of the Cook County Teachers Union and is believed to represent a compromise over issues of wages, health care and workloads.

Though no firm details were available, faculty members are rumored to be receiving a salary increase of 4 percent a year. Health care coverage will increase by US\$750 a year. The college administration's demand that teachers weekly workload be increased by three hours was set aside. Faculty members charged that the increase in class sizes alone have led to de facto workload increases.

The strike was punctuated by demonstrations of students and teachers and clashes with security guards. Faculty members were indignant over City Colleges Chancellor Wayne Watson, who takes in an annual

salary of \$216,000, and lashed out at the free health care for life for other top administrators.

Grocery union halts vote by Colorado workers

The international president of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) halted voting by 17,500 Colorado grocery workers on a new contract claiming he feared workers would ratify an unacceptable agreement. Leaders of Local 7, which represents workers at King Soopers, Safeway and Albertsons, had already called on workers to reject the latest proposal.

In a letter dated November 5, UFCW President Joseph Hansen declared, "You are hereby directed to submit these offers for my review. You are also directed not to submit these offers to the membership for ratification pending completion of my review and a determination as to whether I approve of such offers." Local 7's web site said, "There is a concern that some bargaining units may accept these proposals. The terms of the proposals are so damaging that they may destroy other bargaining units. Therefore, we are submitting those proposals for the review of President Hansen."

The motive behind Hansen's intervention is not clear. On November 3, workers in Colorado Springs rejected the contract. Workers in Denver voted the following day, but UFCW Local 7 declined to release totals. Workers in Pueblo, Fort Collins, Evergreen and Idaho Springs were set to cast ballots the day that Hansen's order came down.

Rocky Mountain News quoted Local 7 spokesman Dave Minshall as saying of the Denver vote, "Given the earlier votes and given the tone of the room, it's my gut feeling Denver also very strongly endorsed the strike."

The grocery chains are demanding the capping of their contributions to health care premiums at 8 percent a year, the establishment of a second-tier wage scale for new hires, an end to cost-of-living increases, and increased use of outside vendors.

Canada

London hospital workers hold information picket

On November 6, about 1,200 London hospital workers, members of Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW), held an information picket in protest against a proposed wage freeze, job cuts and lack of bargaining on the part of the hospital.

The workers criticized the London Health Sciences

Centre for increasing the number of managers and raising their pay an average 7.7 percent a year while announcing it will cut almost 700 workers and close 130 beds to cope with a C\$53 million deficit.

Abitibi workers end strike

Four hundred loggers and forestry workers employed by Abitibi-Consolidated in Grand Falls-Windsor in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador voted 87 percent on November 1 to accept a deal reached between their representatives in the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and management, ending the month-long strike. Key issues in the strike included wages, pensions, early retirement and training.

The new contract includes an 11 percent wage increase over a period of five years and allows workers to retire earlier, at age 58. The deal was reached after the company had issued layoff notices to the striking workers saying that it didn't have enough fiber to keep the mill open.

Deer Lodge workers strike

More than 500 employees at Deer Lodge Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, went on strike November 3. The workers include support staff, licensed practical nurses, health-care aids, dietary personnel and housekeeping staff at the long-term care and rehabilitation facility for adults.

The workers, members of Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), are on strike over the issue of wages, but according to Pat Mason, a union spokeswoman, the employer has not even made an offer.

Strike of Canadian hog slaughter plant workers

About 500 workers, members of United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), went on strike November 1 at Quality Meat Packers in Toronto, demanding improved wages, pensions and working conditions. The last strike at Ontario's second-largest hog slaughter plant was in 1998 and lasted eight weeks.



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