

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 November 2004

## Latin America

### Teachers to strike in Honduras

High school teachers in Honduras announced November 13 that they would strike for 24 hours on Monday, November 15. At issue are 11 months' back wages that the government owes 5,000 of the 20,000 teachers.

Unless their demands are met, the teachers plan to strike before the school year is over (November 30 in Honduras.)

The nonpayment of teachers has become endemic in Honduras. Last month, 2,000 teachers struck in Tegucigalpa, the capital city, to demand back wages for 4,500 of their colleagues. At the time, the government of President Ricardo Madero announced that fulfillment of previous agreements for wages owed to the teachers was "impossible" for the government, given its austerity agreements with the International Monetary Fund.

Secondary school teachers earn about \$300 a month.

### Mexican sugar workers threaten to strike

The Mexican Sugar Industry Union (STIASRM) announced that it is ready to launch a strike November 16 to press its demand that management agree to provide housing and pension benefits.

Union leader Enrique Ramos told the Mexican news agency Notimex that he sees no sign that an agreement will be reached before the strike deadline.

Ramos Rodríguez also said that in addition to the housing and pension benefits, the sugar workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase that does not cover the national inflation rate of 14 percent. The union is asking for \$16,000 per worker in house-building funds. It also seeks the establishment of a \$55 million fund to benefit retired sugar workers.

Mexico's state-owned sugar industry consists of 49 mills that employ 47,000 workers.

### Asuncion's municipal workers demand a 20 percent raise

A strike by Asuncion's municipal labor force will commence this week, barring a last-minute deal on wages. The employees are demanding a 20 percent raise. City authorities have not made a counter-offer. Asuncion is Paraguay's capital city.

The strike deadline is this Wednesday. The walkout will affect refuse collection, street cleaning and repair, the city's botanical gardens and administrative employees, a group of workers that has had no wage increase in four years.

Mayor Enrique Riera has refused to make a wage offer. Instead, the city administration is proposing scaled raises, according to what workers currently earn, though it has yet to specify the raises for each step.

### Chilean workers mobilize in support of El Abra copper miners

Copper miners at the El Abra mine in northern Chile have been on strike since November 4. On November 11, workers at the surrounding mines barricaded roads leading into El Abra in a show of solidarity with the striking miners. The police repressed the demonstration, and three miners were injured and eleven arrested. Mobilizations will continue this week.

El Abra miners have set up tents in the Atacama Desert to protest the company's paltry wage offer. The strike involves 98 El Abra miners and 250 workers employed at the mine by a subcontractor.

### Argentine workers protest Neuquen government repression

On November 11, 3,000 Argentine workers in the southwestern oil-producing Neuquen Province protested against the governor, Jorge Sobish, condemning his authoritarianism. Sobish, a potential candidate for president, is on the extreme right of Argentine politics and is currently embroiled in a struggle against the ceramic workers who are occupying the Zanon ceramics factory.

At a rally in the city of Neuquen, representatives of the Zanon cooperative called for a joint response to the

provincial repression. In addition to ceramic workers, the rally included students, teachers and public health workers. Neuquen teachers carried out a 48-hour strike last week.

## **United States**

### **US Airways requests that courts throw out labor contracts**

US Airways issued a request to a bankruptcy judge last week to cancel labor contracts with three of its unions in an effort to radically cut costs and jettison benefits. Lawyers argued that if the airline failed to receive these new measures, it would be forced into liquidation.

The plan would throw out labor contracts for machinists, flight attendants and customer service agents, comprising some 28,000 workers, and impose pay cuts of 6 percent to 27 percent, depending on job classifications. Work rules would also be eliminated, paving the way for job destruction. Pension plans would be terminated, and the inferior 401(k) benefit plan would be substituted. The airline also wants to reduce or eliminate health care coverage for retirees.

US Airways claims the changes would result in savings of \$1.3 billion a year. The cuts come on top of an earlier bankruptcy court decision that slashed wages by 21 percent. Workers are indignant that throughout this affair, the airline's CEO Bruce Lakefield has not taken any reductions in his \$450,000 salary. US Airways' lead investor is the Retirement Systems of Alabama, whose CEO, David Bronner, is chairman of US Airways.

### **Pennsylvania teachers and school board deadlocked over contract**

Teachers in the New Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, area and the Redbank Valley School District continue to be locked in a contract struggle as the strike concludes its second week. The 107 members of the Pennsylvania State Education Association are seeking annual salary increases of \$2,400 per teacher, while the school board has dug in its heels at \$1,600.

The board is insisting teachers end their strike before resuming negotiations. However, Redbank Valley Education Association President Ron Shrock declared, "We will not stop striking as a condition of bargaining." Teachers have been without a contract for 16 months.

## **Canada**

### **WCB employees vote to reject wage offer**

Nova Scotia Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) employees voted 99 percent to reject the Board's offer of a 2 percent wage increase per year for a three-year contract. Another issue that the workers are concerned about is the WCB's policy of posting the positions of employees on pregnancy leave as permanent, leaving open the possibility that those employees' positions will be permanently replaced by new hires.

Workers are represented by the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE). The union and the WCB will resume negotiations on January 9 and 10, 2005. WCB employees have been without a contract since the end of last year.

### **Outside workers and City of London reach tentative deal**

About 550 workers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), reached a tentative deal with the City of London, Ontario, on November 7. The workers, who are responsible for garbage collection, city arenas and pools, have been without a contract since December 31, 2003, and in a legal strike position since February of this year.

This is the first time the two sides came to the bargaining table in more than eight months, when talks broke off over health care benefits. The union declined to reveal the details of the tentative deal before the workers have seen it. The last contract was settled in 2001 after a 29-day strike.



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