

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 November 2004

Latin America

Retired Mexican farm workers protest at president's ranch

On November 20, more than 4,000 state police and private security guards blocked 3,500 retired farm workers from marching on Mexican President Vicente Fox's estate in San Cristobal in Guanajuato State. The march was part of ongoing protests organized by the Binational Bracero Alliance to press its demand that the government return to the farm workers a savings fund created in 1942. The fund was the repository for 10 percent of the wages of workers who worked in the United States as part of the "bracero" program. This program provided temporary Mexican agricultural labor to US agricultural firms and lasted until 1974. The marchers intended to celebrate the 94th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution at the ranch.

Except for a group of 400 protesters that managed to avoid the blockade and advance to within 12 kilometers of the estate, the rest were stopped at the town of San Francisco Rincon. Alliance leader Ventura Gutierrez Mendez declared to the Mexican daily *La Jornada* that federal authorities had purposely sent very young recruits to confront the elderly farm workers and prevent them from entering Fox's estate.

In addition to the recruits, there was also a contingent of men in black uniforms, with the word "Security" embroidered on their caps. No one seemed to know either where these men came from or whom they represented. Another 3,000 protesters were expected on Sunday.

Chilean miners' strike in its third week

Workers numbering 450 at the El Abra copper mine in Chile's northern tip, high up in the Andes mountains, are now on the third week of their strike, which has become one of the longest mining strikes in Chile's history. The owner of the mine, Phelps Dodge Corp., has yet to respond to their wage demands and continues to operate the mine.

Chilean law grants firms the right to hire permanent replacements once a strike has gone beyond the two-week mark. Mineworker leaders have denounced this tactic by Phelps Dodge and are considering how to respond.

Argentine court employees strike for one day

On November 19, court employees walked out for 24 hours to protest the cancellation of a wage increase by the Supreme Court that had been ordered by the committee of magistrates. The workers are also planning protest demonstrations this week. If the wage increase is not restored, union leader Julio Piumatto declared that a strike of indefinite duration would take place.

Forty-eight-hour strike by Nicaraguan health workers

Twenty thousand public health workers carried out a two-day strike on November 18 and 19 to demand that the 2005 government budget increase funds for public hospitals and wages by US\$37.5 million. The Federation of Health Workers (FTS) represents the workers. FTS leader Gustavo Porras declared the strike a success because all but two hospitals participated in the work stoppage.

Health Minister Jose Alvarado declared that due to an austerity agreement with the International Monetary Fund, possibilities of improving the health budget were limited. The FTS plans to carry out a three-day strike this December if no agreement is reached.

Argentine unemployed march in defense of jailed comrades

Hundreds of unemployed workers in cities across Santa Cruz Province in southern Argentina began a march on November 19 to the city of Caleta Olivia to demand the release of six of their comrades who were jailed for demanding work at Terminales Maritimas Patagonica (TERMAP), an oil-shipping company. Santa Cruz is one of Argentina's oil-producing provinces.

Columns of workers began their march on foot from the Comodoro Rivadavia, Pico Truncado, Puerto San Julian and Las Heras. Six unemployed workers jailed in Caleta participated in a protest of 200 at TERMAP that was broken up by the state police on September 3. The purpose of the demonstration was to demand jobs. The imprisoned workers had just ended an 18-day hunger strike to obtain better conditions at the jail.

The protesters will demand the release of the jailed workers and denounce the anti-labor policies of the government of Santa Cruz and of Argentine President Kirchner's administration.

Argentine government workers strike and protest

On November 19, Argentine government workers, led by the Association of State Employees (ATE), mobilized and rallied in Buenos Aires to demand a monthly minimum wage of 735 pesos (US\$245), increases in family subsidies and monthly pensions for current retirees, and that temporary so-called contract workers be made permanent. ATE officials claim that 735 pesos would place government workers above the poverty line.

ATE leaders have threatened to have more strikes and rallies to press their demands. Friday's strike and rally involved workers at every level of government—federal, provincial and municipal.

At the Buenos Aires rally, ATE leader Pablo Micheli warned that Argentina was on the verge of a social explosion. "Government workers will not have a merry Christmas," declared Micheli. "We will have a Christmas like the one we had under [former Presidents] Menem and De la Rúa." The ATE claims that the administration of President Nestor Kirchner is sitting on a US\$8,000 million surplus—more than enough to meet the workers' demands.

Uruguay football strike

Second Division soccer players in Uruguay, members of the Uruguayan Professional Football Mutual (MUFP), went on strike last weekend, forcing the cancellation of the first round of games in the second-division tournament. At issue are back wages owed by two teams of the 16-team division. Both teams, Racing Club and Huracan Buceo owe about US\$20,000.

Chilean police repress protesting workers and students

More than 250 people were arrested and a gas station worker suffered bullet wounds on November 19 at demonstrations in Santiago

and Valparaiso. Rallies took place to protest the visit by US President George W. Bush to the summit meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Unions, students and community groups have set up a competing forum, the Chilean Social Forum, as an alternative to the right-wing economic policies represented by the APEC

The Friday protests in Santiago drew more than 30,000 workers and students. Security forces stepped in to break up the protests, claiming that a group of hooded demonstrators were disrupting the peaceful protest by setting up barricades. Authorities are also accusing the demonstrators of disrupting electrical services by throwing chains over power lines. Press reports indicate that a special squad of “carabineros” acted against the marchers using indiscriminate and heavy-handed violence.

In Valparaiso, the police attacked hundreds of demonstrators, allegedly for marching without a permit, and arrested 60 protesters.

Chilean President Ricardo Lagos, while claiming to support the right to protest, ordered the mobilization of the “carabineros.” Demonstrators require special permission from the Chilean Ministry of Defense to march and rally.

On November 17, Ricardo Soto, who heads the Chilean branch of Amnesty International, was arrested while leaving a notary’s office in Santiago. The police gave no reason for the arrest. Others were arrested in the same manner, including innocent bystanders and street hawkers.

Amnesty International indicated that Soto’s arrest was unprecedented in Chile and that the “hardening of police activities in Chile is unacceptable, incompatible with democratic practices and harmful to citizen’s human rights.”

United States

Faculty and staff strike Northeastern Illinois University

Five hundred faculty and staff members at Northeastern Illinois University walked off the job November 19 after negotiations between the union and administration officials failed to narrow disagreements over wages and workloads. The University Professionals of Illinois Local 4100 calculated the school’s financial package amounts to a mere 1.4 to 1.6 percent increase over a three-year agreement.

Union members want an across-the-board 2 percent increase, along with a cap on health care premiums and changes in the grievance procedure. The two sides have been negotiating since August 31. Students joined picketers on the first day of the strike, which affects some 12,000 students at the university.

Pennsylvania, New Jersey labor bureaucrats cash in

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported last week that the labor bureaucracy continues to rake in extensive salaries and perks while union members suffer wage and benefit cuts.

In an analysis of union officials in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the newspaper found five elected officers received total payments of \$400,000. Another five followed up with earnings exceeding \$300,000 and 20 brought in more than \$200,000. The paper reported, “Hundreds held two positions simultaneously, part time and full time.... Some held three or four titles at local and national unions. Many served as elected officers for free while getting paid as staff employees, effectively being their own bosses.” A grand total of 776 officers and staff received total payments of a minimum \$100,000 each.

Edward Keller, head of Pennsylvania’s American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME), retired in 2003 at an annual salary of \$142,000. The union granted him an

additional year’s salary and other benefits that brought his total income to \$561,149. The AFL-CIO kicked in another \$18,600 due to his service as an international vice president.

Wendell Young III, president of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1776, who made \$233,353, told the *Inquirer* when questioned about union salaries, “In most instances, people are underpaid. I think salaries are a problem. They’re too low for too many people, but too high for a few.”

Canada

Mass arrests at anti-Quebec government protest

On Friday, November 19, 191 people were arrested and fined C\$138 for participating in what Montreal police termed an “illegal assembly.” The snake-march protest, which snarled traffic in downtown Montreal, was called to rally opposition to the Quebec Liberal government’s cuts to public and social services and its program of tax cuts for business and the well-to-do.

The following day, some 5,000 trade unionists, students, and welfare recipients demonstrated outside the Quebec Liberal Party’s policy convention.

Quebec government threatens to force an end to strike at liquor board

Quebec Finance Minister Yves Seguin has said the provincial Liberal government will not let a strike by 3,800 Quebec Liquor Board employees continue much longer, raising the threat of back-to-work legislation. Seguin raised the possibility of government intervention to end the strike just one day after liquor board employees walked off the job. “It’s a question of public service,” declared Seguin. “The public will not tolerate the situation very long.”

The workers are demanding better schedules and employment guarantees for part-time workers. Their last contract expired two years ago.

Strike at UPS Canada

A total of 3,800 employees of the Canadian division of United Parcel Service walked out on strike Monday, November 22. The strikers—truck drivers and inside workers—recently rejected a tentative contract that the Teamsters union negotiated with the package and parcel shipping company.



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