

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Latin America

### Buenos Aires teachers announce a new strike

Teachers' unions in Buenos Aires, Argentina, announced they would carry out a 48-hour strike on December 6 and 7, in defiance of a compulsory mediation order from the Labor Ministry. If the strike takes place, the Ministry will move to fine the unions and to challenge their right to represent the teachers.

### Striking communication workers occupy transmissions centers in Argentina

Argentina runs the risk of having no international telephone service as a result of a strike by communications workers that began November 29. The workers are demanding a 25 percent wage increase and an end to subcontracting of their jobs.

The phone workers, members of the Federation of Telephone Operators and Employees (FOETRA,) have taken over the national transmission centers belonging to Telecom and Telefonica Argentina, the routing points for all telephone, telex, Internet, fax and bank data transmissions. Strikers have suspended repairs, installation of new services and customer services.

Both telephone companies are suing FOETRA in the courts and have turned to the government of Nestor Kirchner to end the occupations, claiming their equipment is being vandalized and the strikers are poised to cut all transmissions. In addition they have proposed increases in telephone rates to begin in January 2005. Negotiations have collapsed.

On December 3 telephone workers charged the company with organizing a "paramilitary police squad" to intimidate employees and force them to abandon their occupations. A tense standoff is taking place between armed company guards and squads of pickets guarding the occupied facilities.

### Brazilian health workers strike

Twenty-one thousand public health workers in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco suspended their three-week strike for 48 hours on December 4 to give the government

time to present a new proposal. The Union of Health Providers (SINDSAUDE) presented the suspension of the strike as a good faith effort by the workers to resolve the impasse.

SINDSAUDE is demanding health workers wages be raised to national standards. Currently monthly wages are US\$55 for the lowest paid workers, US\$60 for a middle category and US\$150 for the highest paid. The strikers are demanding that the wage be raised to US \$120, \$210 and \$390, respectively.

### Mexico City community college strike

Administrative workers at 20 Mexico City community colleges walked out on strike December 1. The employees are protesting a government proposal for a 4.7 percent raise in wages and benefits. Since no agreement was reached during negotiations on December 3, the strike will continue this week. The union has asked for a 5.9 percent increase.

Workers interviewed by *El Universal*, a Mexico City daily, were angry over management's refusal to increase its wage offer, saying they considered it a sign of management's declaration of war on administrative employees and on the teaching staff. The twenty institutions serve 115,000 students and offer a mix of vocational and academic classes to a largely working class student body.

### Dominican doctors threaten strike

Public health doctors in the Dominican Republic, organized by the Dominican Medical College (CMD), confirmed on December 4 that they would strike over wages on Tuesday December 7. The CMD is also demanding that hundreds of laid off doctors be rehired at public hospitals. Public sector doctors currently earn US\$425 a month.

The medical workers are demanding a 100 percent raise over three years. So far the government of President Leonel Fernandez has refused to budge from an offer of a 30 percent raise.

## United States

### More arrests in Ohio aluminum strike

Another seven strikers were arrested November 29 on the picket lines at the Ormet Corporation's aluminum plant in Hannibal, Ohio. The arrests came on the heels of the release of 10 strikers who were held in jail over the weekend without bail following a rapid enforcement of a restraining

order November 26 that bars more than 10 pickets from the plant gates. The United Steelworkers struck Wheeling, West Virginia based company after Ormet insisted on going forward with a bankruptcy reorganization plan that would gut the contract of some 1,300 workers.

According to strikers, the November 29 incident resulted when the seven workers appealed to a trucker not to cross their picket line. The trucker obliged, turned around his truck and drove off. Police immediately moved in to arrest the workers.

Meanwhile, the ten workers jailed over the weekend spoke out against the arbitrary and violent nature of the November 26 arrests. Striker Jim Miller said he arrived on the picket with his wife and son and was informed of the recently imposed restraining order. As he began to walk away, police pushed his wife and son to the ground and he was assaulted with five taser guns. "I felt like my fingers and toes were going to be blown off," he told the *Times Leader*. "Since then I've had numbness in hands and arms and legs and I've had a headache since that night." Miller's son, Heath, said of his arrest, "I was doing what they asked me, trying to lay down. I never tried to fight back. There was probably four or five of them pulling me, saying I was resisting. I was trying to lay down, but how is it possible to lay down when you've got five people jerking you every which way."

#### **US Airways to ask judge for injunction to stop possible strike**

US Airways has demanded an injunction prohibiting its unions from striking. Unions representing customer service agents and flight attendants have said they would strike if their labor contracts were canceled. A hearing on the issue will take place December 16 before the same judge who has already imposed 21 percent pay cuts on the workforce.

Airline unions are barred from striking until after the failure of federal mediation and the expiration of a "cooling-off" period. But unions maintain this statute of the Railway Labor Act does not apply if contracts are dissolved. The issue facing US Airways and its unions does not have a precedent in airline history.

#### **Los Angeles judge orders end to pharmacists' strike**

A Los Angeles County Superior Court judge issued a November 29 restraining order forcing striking pharmacists back to work at the end of the first day of a planned two-day strike. About 225 pharmacists at county hospitals, jails, and juvenile facilities are rejecting the county's offer of annual raises of 2.5 percent over the next two years.

The Guild for Professional Pharmacists, which represent the strikers, points out that the current wages of \$40.76 an hour fall well below the \$51.39 hourly wage paid by Kaiser Permanente, whose pharmacists are also represented by the Guild. The union has planned a week-long stoppage between

Christmas and New Year's Day. County lawyers will go to court December 20 in an effort to block the work stoppage. The county pharmacists have gone without a contract for more than a year.

#### **Hospital retaliates against one-day strike with lockout**

Sutter Health, owner of 27 hospitals in Northern California, locked out 6,700 nurses at 13 of its hospitals December 2, one day after workers called a 24-hour strike to protest having gone months without a resolution to their contracts. Sutter planned on keeping the lockout in place until December 6.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents the registered nurses, nurses aides, housekeepers, technicians, clerks and licensed vocational nurses at the hospital, has filed suit against Sutter for having hired replacement workers through temporary agencies without informing them they were going to replace workers on strike. California law requires that replacement workers be given notice if they are to be employed as strikebreakers.

#### **Canada**

##### **Newfoundland bus drivers on strike**

More than 100 bus drivers and maintenance workers walked off the job November 29 in two Newfoundland cities, St John's and neighboring Mount Pearl. The strike began after talks between the Amalgamated Transit Union and the public transit commission broke off the previous day. The commission's offer included a wage increase of eight percent over four years. The workers are demanding a wage increase of at least 10 percent and benefits and contract language that would bring them on par with other employees of the city of St John's.

##### **Workers locked out at Montreal truck plant**

Almost 800 workers at Ste-Thérèse Paccar truck plant in Montreal were locked out when their contract expired December 1. According to the union representing the workers, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the main issues are improvement in seniority clauses and a better pension plan. At a vote held November 25, the workers had rejected the last company offer, which included a wage increase of 12 percent over a period of five years, by a margin of 88 percent. After the surprise lockout, however, another vote was held December 3 and the workers accepted a new contract that includes a wage increase, but no improvement in seniority language.



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