

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

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### Latin America

#### Four-day public health strike in Bolivia

Health workers at Bolivian public health hospitals and clinics went on strike December 13 in defense of health care and to demand the payment of back wages. The striking workers went back to work December 17, after the government of President Carlos Mesa paid November salaries, adding a traditional Christmas bonus.

The government also promised to lower working hours and hire more health workers.

#### Brazilian nuclear fuel plant workers on strike over wages

A total of 350 workers at the Resende nuclear fuel plant walked off their jobs Thursday, December 16, to press their demands for higher pay. The strike blocked the domestic production of enriched uranium, for which Brazil initially won a go-ahead from the International Atomic Agency. Also paralyzed is the processing of imported enriched uranium, presently used in Brazil's nuclear power plants.

The strikers are demanding a 7.9 percent wage increase.

#### Mexican hunger strikers fight for the minimum wage

Five members of the Civic Association of Independent Workers (ACTI) have organized a hunger strike at the offices of the National Minimum Wages Commission (CNSM) in Mexico City. They are protesting a paltry 3 percent increase in the minimum wage, proposed by CNSM. The hunger strike began December 13.

ACTI members indicate that the proposed increase amounts to \$US 0.11 per day over the current daily minimum of \$US3.67.

Under public pressure, on December 16, CNSM

proposed a 4.5 percent increase (16.5 cents of a US dollar). According to government authorities, even this raise is below the expected inflation of 5 percent this year.

ACTI leader and hunger striker Edur Velasco denounced the government claims, indicating that the real drop in purchasing power has been about 15 percent. Velasco indicated that at least 10 million workers earn the minimum wage, out of a labor force of 45 million.

ACTI's demand that the minimum wage be set at a constitutional level would require a sixfold increase, to reach the purchasing power it had in 1988. The Mexico City daily *El Universal* estimates that while in 1982 a minimum wage worker was able to afford 92 percent of the minimum breadbasket (that meets basic nutritional needs and basic housing accommodations), today's minimum only covers 15 percent.

### United States

#### Nurses strike St. Louis hospital

About 1,700 nurses struck St. John's hospital in St. Louis December 14 over wages, patient care and other contract issues. Nurses rejected hospital management's three-year contract that called for up to 3 percent annual wages.

The hospital has opposed any attempt to implement terms that would allow nurses to have input into staffing and patient care concerns. Management is also seeking contract language that would allow it to alter benefits during the course of a contract.

Nurses began organizing St. John's at the end of the 1990s and obtained their first contract after a three-day strike in 2001. The hospital is using management personnel and other nurses drawn from St. John's parent operations—the Mercy Health System. St. John's has also contracted with the professional strikebreaking service, US Nursing Corp.

#### Jersey electrical workers rally as new talks

About 300 striking electrical workers rallied

December 18 in Morris Township, headquarters of Jersey Central Power & Light Company (JCP&L), as the strike by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) enters its 19th day. The rally called attention to the fact that JCP&L had increased its assets in the past year by \$10 million—up to a total of \$110 million.

JCP&L, a subsidiary of Ohio's FirstEnergy for the past three years, is seeking sharp increases in the workers' portion of health benefit costs while scrapping dental and vision plans. The company is also seeking a broad revision of work rules. The rally comes as new mediated talks are scheduled to get underway December 21.

#### **Minneapolis public housing workers strike**

Construction and maintenance workers for the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) walked out on strike December 14 after two months of mediated talks failed to produce an agreement. The 76 members of the Construction and General Laborers Local 563 have been without a contract since March as wages have proved to be a major sticking point.

In particular, many workers took classes at the request of the MPHA and were supposed to have received a progression step wage increase after completing the program. But the MPHA has reneged on its agreement.

#### **Canada**

##### **Alberta teachers locked out**

One hundred sixty-five Catholic teachers in Medicine Hat, Alberta, were locked out December 13 after contract negotiations broke down over the issues of salaries, working conditions and health benefits. The teachers, members of the Alberta Teachers Association, went on strike the next day.

The teachers have been without a contract since August of last year and are demanding a pay increase of 10.3 percent over four years, including 2 percent retroactive to September 1, 2004, while the school board is offering 11 percent over five years. In addition, teachers are demanding a cap on the length of a work week.

The provincial government intervened last November in a similar dispute in Parkland school district, preventing both a lockout and a teachers' strike. This time, such an intervention is not expected because a lockout is already in effect.

#### **New Brunswick paper mill workers vote to strike**

On December 13, about 700 workers at the pulp and paper mill in Miramichi, New Brunswick, voted by a 96.7 margin in favor of strike action. The workers are represented by Local 689 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). In response to a notice delivered by the union on December 15, the UPM-Kymmene Corporation, the company that owns the mill, immediately started shutting down its two paper machines in preparation for the strike.

The company had already announced plans to decrease the number of workers employed at the mill from 1,200 to 800 by the end of January next year in a restructuring that would result in harvesting publicly owned forests in New Brunswick and transporting the logs to more modern mills in Newfoundland or the US.



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