

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Puerto Rican water and sewage workers end 12-week strike

A strike by more than 4,000 employees of the Puerto Rican Water and Sewage Authority (AAA) that had begun October 4 appears to have been settled, pending a ratification vote on December 26. The Authentic Independent Union (UIA) that represents the strikers rejected a call for a general strike and instead has accepted a proposal imposed by a dialogue committee appointed by Governor Silas Calderon. Last week, AAA President Jorge Rodriguez issued an ultimatum to begin replacing the striking workers on December 27.

The strike was triggered by a proposal by AAA management to remove control of the company-funded employee health fund from the UIA bureaucracy. Both the Puerto Rican government and AAA management insist that the UIA leadership is corrupt. Eleven UIA leaders, including UIA President Hector Rene Lugo, have been indicted for income tax violation.

Throughout the walkout, UIA leaders struck a militant pose but made it clear that they would confine the struggle to protest actions and rejected a call for a general strike. Other Puerto Rican unions offered limited "moral" support.

Few details have been released of the proposed agreement, though it appears that the UIA bureaucrats have retained control of the health fund. Workers will receive a paltry \$100-a-month wage increase and an \$1,800 signing bonus.

Municipal workers strike in Mexico

Four hundred twenty municipal employees of the port city of Lazaro Cardenas in the state of Michoacan ended a three-day strike on December 23 after the city agreed to pay them the traditional Christmas bonus and to make up for their wages lost during the strike.

Strikers were poised to paralyze this industrial port city on Mexico's Pacific Coast with mass picketing and blockades of city streets and the port if they were not paid by December 24. The biggest impact of the strike was on garbage collection. More than 600 tons of refuse littered the city streets.

City leaders, members of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), are due to leave office on December 31.

On December 23, it appeared that the city was not out of hot water; 500 clerical workers threatened to occupy municipal government offices because they were not included in the agreement with the other strikers.

Lazaro Cardenas workers have been forced to strike over their year-end wages every year for the last four years.

United States

United flight attendants vote to strike against court threat to terminate contracts

United Airlines flight attendants voted by an 88 percent margin to strike should a bankruptcy court judge permit the airline to scrap its labor agreement in a decision anticipated in early February. The airline is seeking cuts amounting to \$138 million along with the termination of pension benefits. The Association of Flight Attendants bureaucracy, which has already negotiated cuts of \$314 million on behalf of its 20,000 flight attendants at United, is seeking to preserve itself through another round of negotiated cuts.

Meanwhile, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), a federal agency charged with overseeing and backing up pension plans, filed a complaint last week to have the pension plan for United pilots terminated as of December 31, 2004. The Airline Pilots Association negotiated an agreement with United to terminate pensions for its 6,400 pilots in return for \$550 million in convertible notes and the replacement of pensions with an inferior 401(k) plan. The PBGC is objecting to the United pilots deal on the grounds that it

delays the liquidation of the pension plan until May 2005, thereby adding a \$140 million burden to the agency since United quit paying into the pension plans back in July 2004.

The extended period would allow an increase in the level of federal insurance coverage for both current and retired pilots invested in the plan. However, there is a \$2.9 billion shortfall in the pension plan, and the PBGC will cover only \$1.4 billion of that amount. The remaining amount will be shouldered by pilots through cuts to their pensions. Some active and retired pilots who have qualified for yearly pensions of \$100,000 would see that amount reduced by nearly 60 percent.

Florida sugar mill strike ends

Striking sugar workers at Florida Crystals plant near South Bay voted 584 to 42 on January 1 to end their five-day strike and return to work despite the imposition of an even worse contract than the one rejected by a 712-41 margin before the strike. Florida Crystals operates three sugar mills, a rice mill, a distribution center and farms that cover 180,000 acres.

The company offered a three-year contract that provides a 2 percent yearly raise and a 25 percent increase in health insurance premiums. But the company's major attacks were contained in contract language that took away overtime pay for 250 farm workers and eliminated an early retirement package for workers aged 62 and older. The company also plans to wipe out the jobs of 150 drivers who are slated to be replaced by an independent trucking firm.

Pennsylvania nursing home workers turned away after ending six-month strike

Nursing home workers at Presbyterian SeniorCare in Washington, Pennsylvania, were turned away December 22 when they tried to return to work without a contract after a six-month strike. The refusal by management to admit the workers was apparently temporary; Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199P had failed to provide a list of returning workers. The nursing home said it would reinstate workers over the course of the next two weeks.

The 155 nurses, aides, maintenance workers, dietary workers, housekeepers and pharmacy technicians struck the nursing home June 1 after the previous contract expired March 31. Workers were seeking a wage increase, better health insurance and input on staffing

policies. On October 25, an unfair labor practices ruling gave the union a 60-day period during which they could return to work under the old agreement. Failure to do so would result in their permanent replacement.

New York city bus drivers threaten strike

Workers at private bus lines in Queens and Brooklyn are threatening to strike unless the administration of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg improves its most recent contract offer.

Officials of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1179 intervened to end a three-day wildcat strike two weeks ago by drivers of private bus lines in Queens and Brooklyn. Union officials said the wildcat strike erupted outside of their control and sought to contain the movement by threatening a wider strike unless new talks with New York city negotiators produced a better agreement.

The drivers launched their wildcat strikes to demand job guarantees after a takeover of the private lines is completed by New York City. Workers are also demanding increased wages. Mayor Bloomberg had threatened to sue the union if it called an authorized strike.

Canada

Quebec winter carnival actors walk out

At least 20 actors, including the featured player "Bonhomme"—the cheerful snowman—have reportedly resigned over stalled contract talks, throwing into doubt the holding of the renowned Quebec Winter Carnival or "Bonhomme Carnaval."

Two weeks ago, actors and support staff with the festival joined the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), but talks soon bogged down over subcontracting and job security issues. Other workers for the Carnival are affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and remain on the job. Festival organizers have said the event, scheduled to take place between January 28 and February 13, will go ahead as planned using replacement actors if needed.



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