

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Mexican lye plant workers fight for jobs

Fifty-four workers at the Calera Grande de Jiutepec, a lye processing plant near Cuernavaca, Mexico, are set to strike on January 20 to defend their jobs against the closure of the factory. The employees have been conducting protests in front of the plant to demand payment of back wages and benefits. The workers are owed 300,000 pesos, about \$US27,000.

Negotiations have broken down and Calera Grande management has invited the workers to begin their walkout, an indication to the workers that it intends to use the strike as a justification to shut down the plant.

Medical strike in Haiti

Seventy-five Haitian resident doctors are in the second week of their strike at Haiti's largest public hospital to demand the payment of three month's back wages. The Haitian government has ignored the doctors' wage demands. Supporting the strikers are 65 medical students.

The residents at the Port Au Prince General Hospital, who only earn \$US140 a month, also object to a government proposal to admit students from private universities as residents because they would push out state university students.

Bolivian unions demand President Mesa's resignation

The Bolivian Workers Central (COB) is calling for a 24-hour national strike this Monday to press for the resignation of President Carlos Mesa. COB leaders have denounced Mesa's economic policies, considering them to be a continuation of the policies of his predecessor, Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada, who was removed from office by mass popular protests in October 2003.

COB is also demanding that Lozada be brought to trial and that new presidential elections be held. In addition the union is calling for the nationalization of the country's oil industry and the cancellation of a water supply contract with Lyonnaise des Eaux, a French company.

COB General Secretary Jaime Solares denounced Mesa's proposal of a 10 percent increase in the price of gasoline and

a 23 percent increase in diesel fuel for 2005, drastically reducing government subsidies for those fuels from \$US90 million to \$US60 million.

Joining the COB are civic groups in El Alto, a city near La Paz, including groups of students, retired miners and the El Alto COB. El Alto was at the center of the mass protests in 2003 that forced Lozada's resignation. It is a poor, working class city of 700,000 inhabitants; many of them are Indians that recently migrated from rural areas.

Government authorities claim that the increases in the price of fuel are irreversible and blamed them on the scarcity of gasoline and diesel due to the contraband shipments of those products into neighboring countries.

Mexico City transit workers threaten to strike

To press for its demand for a 10 percent wage increase, the Union of Transit Workers (RTP) of Mexico City announced plans for a strike on February 15. The RTP represents 3,000 transit workers.

RTP leader Carlos Viquez Corona declared that his members have demanded that the union not compromise on the wage demand, since it is necessary to compensate for the deterioration of their buying power.

El Abra copper mine fires workers

Leaders of the Miners Union (Contractual Minera, CM) indicated on January 7 that management at the El Abra copper mine in northern Chile is engaging in punitive firings of workers. So far, four workers have been fired and another two will be fired soon.

CM President Julio Ramos linked the firings to a recent strike at El Abra but struck a conciliatory tone, declaring that some sackings may be justified and asking that all such matters be decided in negotiations with the union. Otherwise, Ramos declared, the CM would turn to unspecified "techniques" to force a resolution of the issue.

United States

Washington, DC, hotel workers threaten strike during Bush inauguration

The union representing 3,500 hotel workers has threatened to strike 14 hotels in the US capital if it does not reach a citywide agreement by January 15, after nearly four months of failed negotiations. A bargaining session between UNITE/HERE Local 25 and the hotel association was

scheduled for January 11.

Inauguration attendees “may have to carry their own luggage, make their own beds, and give up luxuries like room service and clean towels,” says Kimberly Murray, a housekeeper at the Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill. In addition to such inconveniences, events scheduled for affected hotels could be understaffed or cancelled. The Presidential Inaugural Committee’s own Candlelight Dinner and Constitution Ball, for example, are scheduled at hotels where employees may be on strike.

Illinois teachers strike after failure to reach contract agreement

Teachers at the Minooka Community High School, southwest of Chicago, went on strike January 10 after nine months of talks failed to produce a contract. No details were made available concerning contract issues except that the two sides remained far apart on salaries and health insurance.

According to Minooka Education Association President Tom Peterson, annual increases in teacher contributions have been “eating up the salary increases we receive.” The 84 teachers represented under the Minooka bargaining unit first began contributing to their health insurance in the last contract.

A comparison by the school board of Minooka’s salaries and benefits with those of five similar schools in the region revealed Minooka to have the lowest living standards of the group. The average annual pay for a Minooka teacher is \$51,000.

New Jersey trash haulers strike

Waste Management, Inc. in Mercer County, New Jersey, moved quickly to bring in strikebreakers from Pennsylvania and Virginia after 180 members of Teamsters Local 701 voted to reject management’s latest offer. Neither side has revealed the differences that led to the strike vote.

One week ago, Local 701 Secretary Treasurer Bob Castellano revealed that Waste Management was seeking a five-year agreement that would require increased contributions by workers under their benefit package more severe than under the previous four-year agreement. According to Phil Miller of the Mercer County Improvement Authority, “Union management is encouraging members not to strike.”

Private bus line workers strike in New York

Six hundred workers employed by Green Bus Lines in Queens and Command Bus Company in Brooklyn walked off their jobs Monday morning, January 10, to demand a new contract after two years of working without an agreement. The drivers and maintenance workers, represented by Amalgamated Transit Union Locals 1179 and 1181, were joined on the picket line by another 400 former

employees Monday. Three weeks ago drivers at the bus lines engaged in a three-day wildcat strike.

Strikers are demanding retroactive pay raises and better health benefits. But the most important issue is job security because the city government, which has subsidized seven private bus lines since 1974, is demanding the bus lines be absorbed by the state Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). Mayor Michael Bloomberg has pushed the plan in order to end the city’s \$150 million annual subsidies to the bus lines. The union says it wants the current workforce to be retrained after any transfer. Workers are also concerned their health benefits will run out before the MTA takes over the franchises, which is now scheduled for April 30.

Canada

British Columbia college staff take strike action

Hundreds of staff members at colleges across British Columbia began rotating strike action this week against a wage freeze imposed by the provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell.

On Monday, January 10, members of the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) began rotating strikes at Kwantlen College campuses in the southern coastal region and 92 support staff at seven Northwest Community College campuses across northwestern BC who are part of the same union served strike notice last Friday. Strike notices were also served last week at the BC Institute of Technology, Northern Lights University College and Douglas College.

The union points to the double standard in the government wage freeze that allows for pay increases for administrators, some of whose salaries are routinely hiked by over 20 percent, but not for their subordinates, many of whom have not had a wage increase in years.

CN Railway strike looms

As many as 6,500 train-crew members and engineers could go on strike as early as January 20 if a deal isn’t reached between union leaders and the country’s largest rail company, Canadian National Railway.

Reports have emerged that the railway has undertaken to train 1,000 managers in preparation for a strike, drawing on their experience last year when managers effectively maintained operations when maintenance workers walked out for 30 days. Talks between the company and two unions, Teamsters and the UTU, are set to resume January 13.



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