

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Latin America

Argentine municipal workers threaten to strike

An assembly of municipal workers in the city of Gualeguaychu in Entre Rios province has called a strike and rally for this Friday. The rally is expected to include hundreds of municipal workers from across the province, particularly from the cities of Concordia and Concepcion del Uruguay. All three are important cities on the border with Uruguay. The workers seek to press city authorities to suspend work rules that abolish educational benefits and cut pay for overtime.

Bolivia: protests continue against Mesa administration

This week, workers, students, peasants and small businesspeople will rally at refineries in Santa Cruz and other Bolivian cities to protest increases in the price of fuel and to press for the resignation of President Carlos Mesa.

Mesa was able to ride out a series of strikes last week, centered in the city of Los Altos, Bolivia's poorest municipality, but the protests are expected to continue throughout the week. Last Thursday, a mass march of Los Altos citizens entered La Paz to protest Mesa's economic and fuel policies. Los Altos won a preliminary victory when President Mesa agreed to one of its demands, the cancellation of a contract with the French water utility Suez Lyonnaise de Eux that since 1997 had administered water and sewage for the 1.7 million inhabitants of Los Altos and La Paz.

The Regional Workers Confederation (COR) of Los Altos announced it would lead a march into La Paz this Monday. Meanwhile, the Bolivian Workers Confederations (COB) signed a pact of "revolutionary unity" with peasant and petty-bourgeois organizations to intensify the struggle against Mesa.

Central American air traffic controllers to strike in defense of Guatemalan counterparts

Last Friday, Central American air traffic controllers indicated that they would paralyze Central America's air space in solidarity with five Guatemalan air traffic controllers who were arrested for "promoting a strike" in connection with a one-day work stoppage that Guatemalan air traffic controllers carried out January 11.

The Technical Assessment Group for Central American Air Traffic Control (GATCTA), the union that represents the air traffic controllers, issued a memo granting Guatemalan authorities 24 hours to release the workers.

Argentine teamsters on strike

Beginning this Wednesday, and for an indefinite amount of time, Argentine teamsters will walk off their jobs. At issue are working conditions and days off.

Juan Manuel Palacios, national secretary of the Argentine Transport Union (UTA) charged 80 percent of companies with disobeying contractual and legal requirements for drivers' rest hours and working

conditions. The UTA is demanding that more drivers be hired.

Colombian coal miners' strike threat

Due to a breakdown in wage negotiations, workers at the Cerrejon mine in the Guajira Peninsula of northwest Colombia declared they intended to walk out. The final decision will be made at a workers' meeting to take place next week. The Cerrejon mine employs 500 workers.

The miners at Cerrejon are demanding that the night shift begin at 10 p.m., which would include premium pay from then on. They are also demanding improved working conditions.

Ecuador braces for a strike wave

According to a report in the *Miami Herald*, Ecuador is bracing for a strike wave that will involve more than 300,000 workers. The strikes have been called to protest the layoff of 5,000 workers.

Miguel Garcia, president of the Federation of Public Employees (FEDESEP), announced that public employees would strike this week against the mass layoff of workers in 63 public agencies. Garcia indicated that unemployment rates, now at 11 percent, would surely rise further if Ecuadorian President Lucio Gutierrez insists on his austerity measures.

In addition to the government workers, public health employees are threatening to strike over wages, and retirees are planning mass protests, demanding an increase in their retirement checks.

United States

Missouri and Indiana governors rescind collective bargaining rights for state workers

Newly elected Missouri Governor Matt Blunt rescinded collective bargaining rights last week for thousands of state workers in the first executive order of his administration. The move repeals a 2001 executive order by Democratic Governor Bob Holden that allowed certain sections of state workers to bargain through unions.

Blunt also indicated that he believes contracts negotiated since 2001 for 25,000 state workers represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and another 9,000 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) are invalid. Contracts for some of these workers extend until 2006. The order also bars state workers from striking.

Indiana Republican Governor Mitch Daniels also issued an executive order that withdrew bargaining rights for 25,000 state workers and rescinded negotiated contracts that were to run until 2007.

New York bus strike continues as negotiations collapse

The one-week-old strike by 600 active drivers and maintenance workers, supported by 200 retirees and affecting 70,000 riders, continues as negotiations between the union and the city collapsed on Thursday, January 13. Mayor Michael Bloomberg claims that he has met the union's demand that the city pay \$1.5 million to close the deficits in the workers' health insurance fund. He also stated that the city is willing to pay for back wages owed, but insists that this money

will be paid only after the two lines affected—Green Bus Lines in Queens and Command Bus Co. in Brooklyn—have been taken over by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

The strikers have been without a contract for two years and are demanding that the city pay for the last two years of back wages before the MTA takes control of the two lines. The city is seeking to have all the private bus lines become part of the public transportation system, when it would no longer have to subsidize the private bus lines for about \$150 million per year.

Some commentators believe that the mayor was taking this hard line on the back wages in order to pressure the companies to reach a takeover deal more beneficial to the city. On the other hand, some believe that the companies are trying to use the workers' strike to put pressure on the city to get a better deal for the owner of both lines, Jerry Cooper. The city has pointed out that the two lines already receive \$110 million a year from the city, and that management of the two companies receives \$2.1 million per year. Cooper himself is paid more than \$170,000 per year. Therefore, both the city and the companies are seeking to exploit the strikers' struggle for job security, wages and health benefits to cut the best takeover deal for one side or the other or make it possible for the companies to cancel the takeover deal altogether.

According to one press report, Locals 1179 and 1181 of the American Transit Union (ATU), representing the strikers, have decided to file a lawsuit against both the city and the MTA in an attempt to guarantee pension and collective bargaining rights. The suit is based on a 1975 agreement between city and labor officials, when the city began to receive federal funds to help subsidize the private lines.

Reuters journalists in US carry out byline strike

Journalists for Reuters in the United States called a byline strike January 13 to protest the company's demands for concessions in the current contract talks as well as preparations by the news organization to export jobs overseas.

Reuters management is in the third year of a cost-cutting program that aims to wipe out 3,000 jobs internationally. The company is presently expanding its operations in Bangalore (India) and Singapore, both of which it is believed will result in the elimination of jobs in the United States. Already, the company is covering financial news on Wall Street from India.

Some 500 journalists, technicians and other workers represented by Local 31003 of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) have been without a contract for almost two years.

Ohio newspaper settles with one of two striking unions

Management for Youngstown, Ohio's *Vindicator* newspaper reached an agreement with its 24 striking mailroom workers while the remaining 171 members of the Newspaper Guild continue to walk picket lines in the two-month-old strike.

The agreement with Teamsters Local 473, which represents the mailroom workers, came after the newspaper agreed to offer signing bonuses that will somewhat offset management's imposition of payments for health care. Mailroom workers will now be expected to pay \$34 a month for medical coverage for single workers and \$64 a month for families.

No talks are presently scheduled for reporters and photographers represented by Local 34011 of the Newspaper Guild-Communications Workers of America. The 70,000-circulation *Vindicator* continues to be published with the help of out-of-state replacement workers.

Caterpillar workers ratify new pact

The 9,000 Caterpillar workers at plants in Illinois, Colorado, Pennsylvania and Tennessee ratified a new six-year contract that it is believed will compel workers to pay for medical coverage for the first time. The United Auto Workers (UAW) declined to provide contract details, nor would it divulge the final vote tally that led to ratification.

The UAW would only say that the agreement contained both gains and concessions for workers while preserving jobs from being outsourced. Reuters news speculated that the new agreement also contained a lower wage scale for new hires. The previous agreement at Caterpillar expired in April 2004. Since then, rank-and-file workers twice angrily rejected company offers that would have imposed concessions under conditions where the company turned in record profits. The UAW bureaucracy declined to give a recommendation on the earlier contracts, but endorsed the latest agreement.

Canada

University of New Brunswick workers vote to strike

About 365 support staff at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) voted last week in favor of a strike. Employees, who include tradespeople, cleaners, laborers and secretaries, as well as library and security staff, are represented by the UNB Employees Association.

Main issues in the dispute include wages and benefits, with the union demanding a 12 percent wage increase over three years, while the university is offering 9.5 percent over four years. The previous three-year contract expired on June 30 of last year.

Whistler workers vote to strike

On January 10, workers at the popular Resort Municipality of Whistler, British Columbia, voted unanimously in favor of strike action. The 30 wastewater treatment workers, utilities workers and by-law officers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2010, are responding to the employer's demands to roll back benefits, eliminate set work hours and deny them an allowance to offset the high cost of living in the ski resort.

Ituna strike ends

Twenty-three group home workers at Deer Park Villa social service agency in Ituna, Saskatchewan, have ended their seven-month strike. The workers, members of CUPE Local 4552, went on strike June 3, 2004, fighting for union recognition in order to compel their employer to recognize job seniority in determining promotions and overtime calls.

On January 10, the workers successfully applied to the labor relations board to return to work. "Although we know our cause is reasonable and just, it appears the employer would rather continue the dispute indefinitely than negotiate a fair settlement," said union spokesperson Moira Markle. The union expects the labor board will appoint a conciliator to mediate in future negotiations.



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