

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Colombian court ratifies firing of oil workers

Colombia's arbitration court gave the go-ahead to state-owned Ecopetrol to dismiss 55 workers who participated in a 35-day strike last year. Of the 55, 23 are union leaders of the oil workers union (UNO) and 22 were non-permanent workers. At the same time the court ordered Ecopetrol to rehire 104 other workers. The latter will still be subject to internal disciplinary measures, according to Ecopetrol's president, Isaac Yanovich.

The strike against the privatization of Ecopetrol and the military occupation of the refinery at Barrancabermeja ended May 26, 2004, after the administration of President Alvaro Uribe agreed not to proceed with the privatization. During the walkout, 248 workers were fired, mostly from the Barrancabermeja plant, including UNO's top leaders. Eighty seven of the sacked workers were forced to retire.

On January 18, the UNO declared the court decision a victory for Colombian labor because the court ordered the rehiring of the 104 workers, though it did not comment on the impending disciplinary charges they might face. It also declared that it would continue fighting for the 33 sacked workers by taking their case to the International Labor Organization (ILO.)

Colombian teachers protest arrests

Twenty-four teachers were arrested January 16 in the city of Sincelejo, Department of Sucre, in Colombia as a result of protests that began during placement tests for new public school teachers. The Colombian teachers unions opposed the use of placement tests to assign jobs.

When it became evident that the arrested educators would not be released, on January 18 Sucre teachers launched a strike and 200 rallied to protest the government action. The teachers are members of the Sucre Educators Association (ADES.)

ADES President Salvador Vanegas Carcamo declared that the protests would continue until the release of the arrested teachers. The jailed teachers are being accused of vandalism, destruction of public documents and the stealing and destruction of placement examinations. The police also claim that an unknown teacher threw a stone and hit the police commander, though the latter has declared that the aggressor was not a teacher.

Similar incidents took place across Colombia, mainly in Bogota, and in the Department of Antioquia. In all, 103 teachers were arrested; most were released the same day.

At stake were 90,000 teaching positions, to be distributed among 194,645 educators.

Strikebreakers used against Guatemalan air traffic controllers

On January 18, Guatemala's 56 air traffic controllers launched a strike to press their demand for higher wages. The controllers are demanding a monthly wage of US\$645. Air traffic in and out of Guatemala was suspended until January 20 when strikebreakers were brought in from El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Mexican authorities also sent a six-person contingency planning team to help in the strikebreaking operation.

Mexican voice actors to strike

Actors that dub the voices for the "Simpsons" in Spanish for all of Latin America are set to strike this February if there is no resolution to the contract impasse between them and a Mexican dubbing company recently acquired by Grabaciones y Doblajes Internacionales, S.A. (GDI)

At issue is the closed shop. GDI management is insisting on the right to hire outside talent, a practice that was forbidden under the old agreement.

Humberto Velez, the Spanish voice of Homer Simpson, declared that the National Actors Association (ANDA) is set to strike this company. One hundred fifty workers would be involved, delaying production of the "Simpsons" and four other shows.

On January 21 the voice actors and their supporters rallied at the government's Labor Conciliation Bureau to publicize their struggle.

Airline mechanics strike in Argentina

Mechanics and technicians that work for Austral Air Lines (a division of Argentina Airlines) carried out a one-day strike on January 21 to protest the firing of a worker for causes considered unjustified by the workers.

United States

US Airways machinists accept concessions

The 8,800 machinists at US Airways have voted by a wide margin to accept \$350 million in annual concessions. The cuts complete the airline's demand for overall savings of \$1 billion from all labor groups to bail out the bankrupt airline. The agreement, which extends to 2009, cuts wages in the range of 12.8 to 20 percent, eliminates the pension plan, reduces sick time and will result in the loss of 2,000 jobs.

The concessions were accepted after the federal bankruptcy judge gave the airline approval to rip up its contract with the IAM (International Association of Machinists). Union officials called off any threat to strike the airline and paved the way for the concessions to be forced upon their membership.

With the concessions from workers in hand, US Airways now awaits approval from a US bankruptcy court judge to sit down with lenders to discuss \$250 million in financing.

St. Louis Nurses vote to end strike, open shop imposed

Registered nurses at St. John's Mercy Medical Center in St. Louis voted 528 to 127 January 21 to end their five-week strike and accept a new three-year contract that will allow nurses to opt out of union membership. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 655 recommended the agreement, which also raises hourly wages by 3 percent in each year of the new agreement and offers bonuses to nurses at the top of their pay scale.

The isolation of the 1,700 nurses by the UFCW led several hundred to cross picket lines. The previous contract, which expired in October of last year, was the first contract ever negotiated on behalf of the nurses.

Portland social workers strike children's center

Portland police arrested 13 striking workers from a southeast Portland center for mentally ill children on criminal mischief charges after workers set up picket lines outside the office of Peter Northrup, the president of the Parry Center board of directors. The workers, members of the Service Employees International Union, went on strike in an effort to raise wages, which are currently only \$9 per hour.

New York City bus workers end strike

The city administration and the two unions representing striking bus drivers and maintenance workers reached a tentative settlement on January 19, ending a 10-day walkout by 600 active employees, supported by 200 retirees, working for Green Bus Lines in Queens and Command Bus Co. in Brooklyn. The workers struck on January 10 after working without a contract for two years.

Mayor Bloomberg has agreed to allow the workers to receive their retroactive pay raises of a \$1,000 bonus for 2003 and 3 percent for 2004 before the lines are taken over by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The workers' average annual salary is between \$38,000 and \$40,000. The city had already agreed to fund a \$1.5 million deficit in union medical benefits. The mayor is eager to have the two lines become part of the public transportation system in order to end the city's obligation to pay \$57 million a year in subsidies.

Before the agreement, Bloomberg insisted that the workers would not get their retroactive increases until the MTA actually absorbed the two lines. For reversing his position and agreeing to allow the workers to obtain their retroactive pay hikes before the takeover, the leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union locals 1181 and 1179 representing the strikers have agreed, according to the mayor, not to oppose the liquidation of the two companies into the public bus system. Union officials, however, have told the press that they never opposed the takeover. The workers went on strike because they were very concerned not only about back pay raises and health benefits, but also the issue of job security once the MTA absorbs the two private lines.

Chicago labor bureaucrat charged with embezzlement

The US Department of Labor charged former Chicago Iron Workers president John Ruel on January 18 with embezzling tens of thousands of dollars through the use of credit and phone card charges for personal use. Ruel, who already brings in a six-digit figure salary as president of the union's district council, for more

than a decade leading up to 2001, charged liquor, limousines and other items, including expenses for a personal vacation in Ireland.

Ruel was appointed by Governor Jim Edgar and reappointed by Governor George Ryan to sit on the McPier board, which oversees McCormick Place and Navy Pier.

Canada

Toronto airport hit by four-hour wildcat strike

On January 18, over 110 machinists and ground crew employed by Air Canada—the country's largest airline—walked off the job in defiance of their union, causing the cancellation and delay of dozens of flights at the country's largest airport.

Workers for Air Canada at Toronto's Pearson International Airport were responding to a disciplinary letter accusing them of time card abuse. While the company claimed they had been swiping electronic time cards on behalf of other workers, the strikers said this was only done by those who passed up breaks during the day and went home early with a supervisor's permission. The walkout took place without the support of their union, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW), and was only ended after IAM officials secured a promise from management that no disciplinary action would be taken.

Second Quebec Wal-Mart store unionized

A majority of Wal-Mart employees at a Saint-Hyacinthe store in the province of Quebec signed union membership cards to join the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 501 on January 17. They thus joined their counterparts at the Wal-Mart in Jonquiere, which was unionized last August and where the union is trying to negotiate a first collective agreement. Although the UFCW is in the process of seeking recognition at 12 other Wal-Mart locations in Quebec, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, these two are currently the only two unionized Wal-Mart stores in North America.

Contract talks at Powerlasers on hold

Negotiations for a first contract at Dofasco-owned plant Powerlasers Limited broke down on January 21 after months of negotiations and a strike vote has been scheduled for January 29. The main outstanding issues are wages and pensions. The 60 employees at the Concord, Ontario, plant just north of Toronto signed up for United Steelworkers (USWA) union membership last July. Powerlasers manufactures laser processing systems for the automotive and metal fabricating industries.



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