

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Protests continue in Bolivia

Protests continued in the city of Santa Cruz in southern Bolivia against the policies of President Carlos Mesa. On January 25, more than 5,000 transportation workers and their supporters marched through downtown Santa Cruz demanding Mesa's ouster. The protests began two weeks ago over increases in the price of fuel. Though Mesa rolled back some of the increases in diesel and gasoline, Santa Cruz business interests took advantage of the public anger to push for greater political autonomy from the central government.

Argentine workers protest Buenos Aires' new security chief

Thirty months after the killing of Maximiliano Kosteki and Dario Santillan, two young leaders of the unemployed movement, hundreds of unemployed workers marched on January 26 to protest the designation of Juan Jose Alvarez as the city's security chief. The city's mayor, Anibal Ibarra, appointed Alvarez January 6. The appointment is widely seen as part of a political deal between contending wings of the ruling Peronist Party.

Juan Jose Alvarez is considered to be the intellectual author of the police riot that resulted in the Santillan-Kosteki killing. On that day, June 26, 2002, Alvarez was security secretary of the governor of Buenos Aires province and was entrusted with the task of repressing the wave of protests against the government's economic policies; he actively coordinated the security forces that attacked a demonstration of the unemployed, which resulted in two deaths and 40 wounded by gunshots.

The protesters marched along the route of the massacre in Avellaneda where the two youth were

killed. "Alvarez bears responsibility for their deaths," declared Alberto, Santillan's father. "He cannot be in charge of security because killers cannot protect."

The protesters also consider Alvarez the organizer of the official cover-up that followed the attack and demanded his resignation.

Hospital strike continues in Haiti

A strike by doctors at Port Au Prince's largest public hospital, the 700-bed General Hospital, is now in its fourth week. The resident doctors went on strike on December 28 to demand three months pay that is owed them. The doctors earn between US\$140 and US\$200 per month. The residents also object to a plan to bring private school students into the public hospital's residency program because it would undermine the chances of public school medical students.

The strike continues even though the government of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue paid the strikers two months' back pay and rescinded the plan to bring in private school graduates. The residents refused to accept the money until they see the lists of new residents and make sure that there are no private students among them.

Striking in support of the residents are nurses, other doctors and other hospital personnel.

Nicaraguan teachers to strike this week

Nicaraguan teachers announced late last week that they would strike on January 31 to press for higher wages. The union is demanding that the government of President Enrique Bolaños release US\$11 million that was appropriated by the legislature for teachers' raises. The government has agreed to only release US\$9.6 million, claiming it cannot commit itself to continue the higher level of salaries beyond this year.

The teachers are asking that parents send their children to school anyway. January 3 marks the beginning of the school year in Nicaragua. Bolaños has already declared that, despite the strike, he will participate in a ceremony inaugurating the 2005 school

year.

Currently, Nicaraguan teachers earn between US\$70 and US\$100 per month.

United States

United Airlines threatens to cancel contracts after mechanics reject concessions

United Airlines said it will ask a bankruptcy court to cancel the labor agreement with its mechanics and unilaterally set wages and benefits at a lower level after the workers voted down a concession package. The 7,000 members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association rejected an 18.3 percent cut in pay and benefits that would have allowed United to pocket about \$96 million a year. Workers then voted by an 89 percent margin to strike the airline in the event it uses the courts to abrogate their contract.

United is presently seeking to extract \$725 million in labor costs from its 62,000 workers in the hopes of emerging from bankruptcy by fall. The carrier has already slashed workers' pay and benefits by \$2.5 billion since it first declared bankruptcy in December 2002.

At the beginning of this week, pilots and flight attendants are expected to announce the results of balloting on their own separate concession agreements. Flight attendants have already voted to strike the airline should their contract be rejected.

Company threatens permanent replacements in New Jersey garbage strike

Striking Teamsters trash haulers for Mercer County in New Jersey rejected an ultimatum by Waste Management officials to accept its most recent contract proposal by January 29. Waste Management sent out a letter to all 186 members of Teamsters Local 701 threatening to withdraw its contract proposal and hire permanent replacements in the event the union failed to come to terms.

The company has declined to make public its offer, and the Teamsters union has only said that the healthcare package was unacceptable. Workers initially walked out on strike January 9. Meanwhile, the Teamsters have another contract with Waste Management in the Camden area that will end in the coming week and have threatened that trash haulers will be going out on strike.

Tentative agreement in Portland childcare strike

Negotiators for the Parry Center in Portland, Oregon,

and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 reached a tentative agreement January 26 and anticipated that the 85 striking workers would ratify the accord by the beginning of the week.

The strikers, who provide care for mentally and emotionally disturbed children, walked off the job November 29 after management refused to meet their demand for a 45-cent-an-hour wage increase. The workers just came off a two-year wage freeze, and the bulk of the union members make a mere \$9.28 an hour, yet are required to have a college degree.

The new contract calls for a 20-cent-an-hour wage increase in the first year, a cost-of-living increase in the second, and a 10-cent wage increase in the third year.

Canada

Kawartha teachers vote to strike

On January 26, elementary public school teachers, members of the Kawartha Pine Ridge local of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike by a margin of 99 percent. Main issues in their dispute are working conditions and increased workload. The teachers' last contract expired on August 31, 2004. They are planning to start work-to-rule in March if no agreement is reached by then. Kawartha Pine Ridge local represents 1,408 teachers in the area east of Toronto.

The decision to strike was also made the same day by 490 teachers at Near North local of ETFO, about 200 km north of Toronto, with a vote of 91 percent in favor.

Rehab workers set to strike February 2

One hundred forty-five members of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 597, employed at the Muki Baum Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Multi-Handicapped, are set to go on strike February 2 after rejecting the employer's offer to cut pay for overnight counsellors by 60 percent January 28. The rehabilitation workers provide residential and day program services to children with developmental disabilities at the agency based in Downsview, north of Toronto.



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