

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Camaragibe, Brazil, employees end 76-day walkout

Twelve hundred municipal employees in the Brazilian City of Camaragibe ended a 76-day strike February 1 after authorities promised to pay them back wages for December and the 13th month (a customary holiday bonus in Brazil). Camaragibe is a suburb of Recife, in Pernambuco State. The municipal employees union (Servidores de Camaragibe), together with Mayor João Lemos, agreed that, depending on the city's financial condition, Camaragibe will begin making payments immediately; otherwise, the payments will be postponed until April.

As part of the settlement, the city agreed to open its books to union inspection; however, Camaragibe is insolvent. Back wages for November were paid in January. The city claims a monthly income of 4 million reals; its wage bill is 1.8 million.

Mexican miners strike

Workers walked out in two Mexican mines, in Mezcala, in the state of Guerrero, and in Tlanepantla, in the state of Mexico, after rejecting a 6 percent wage increase. The National Miners and Metalworkers Union (SNTMMSRM) postponed scheduled strikes in seven other mines in the states of Hidalgo, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Puebla and Mexico to study a wage offer of 10.5 percent. A decision is expected this week.

Nicaraguan teachers' strike

A total of 30,000 Nicaraguan teachers in 7,200 schools went on strike on January 31, the beginning of Nicaragua's 2005 school term. According to Education Minister Angel Garcia, only half the schools were affected by the strike.

The draft budget proposes a \$US25 a month bonus for each teacher in 2005. Last year, the Assembly had approved a \$US43 raise in wages. The president rejected the offer, replacing it with the bonus proposal. The teachers' union (ANDEN) rejects the idea of a bonus, demanding a permanent increase in wages. Such an increase would affect social security payments and the 13th-month end-of-the-year bonus.

The Nicaraguan government declared that the draft budget already exceeds a \$US39 million ceiling for a maximum budget deficit imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and is threatening to declare the teachers' strike illegal. This move gives the government the option of withholding teachers' wages and of firing striking teachers. The IMF has threatened to withhold all aid if Nicaragua exceeds its budget-deficit ceiling.

ANDEN leaders have responded by saying that they will not surrender their demand. The teachers are planning to march

through Nicaragua's main cities to press for their wage demands. The Federation of High School Students has declared unconditional support for the teachers and plans to march and occupy high schools this week.

Before the strike began, the Federation of Health Workers had announced that its members would strike in solidarity with the educators; however, after the government released draft budget information that proposed a 30 percent wage increase for health workers, the union decided not to support the teachers.

Transit strike in Buenos Aires, Argentina

On February 3, Buenos Aires' subway workers carried out a four-hour strike; the next day, they walked out for six hours as part of a "fight plan" to press for higher wages that began in November. Both walkouts took place during peak hours. When the company, Metrovias, attempted to run some of the trains using management personnel, striking workers blocked the rails. Metrovias's management insists that the company cannot afford wage increases.

Despite economic revival, Chilean unemployment is on the increase

Despite reporting economic growth of 5.7 percent in 2004, Chile's official rate of unemployment increased from 8.5 percent in 2003 to 8.8 percent in 2004. Chile's second-largest city, Valparaiso, reported the highest jobless rate, 11.2 percent of the labor force. Santiago's 9.2 percent is seven tenths higher than in 2003, according to a recent survey by the National Statistics Institute (INE).

According to union economists, INE uses statistical methods that hide the real magnitude of the problem. The real rate of unemployment fluctuates between 16 and 18 percent.

The rise in unemployment, which the government of President Ricardo Lagos attributes to a combination of population growth and aggressive cost cutting by the business sector, is creating political problems for the government coalition at the beginning of an electoral season.

When he was elected in 2000, Lagos promised to vigorously combat unemployment. Instead, official unemployment jumped from 400,000 to 600,000, despite high copper prices and a boom in agricultural exports. In contrast, profits for Chile's major corporations are at an all-time high. Economic inequality in Chile is highly skewed, even by South American standards. The widening gap between rich and poor is becoming a central theme in this year's elections.

United States

College board backs victimization of Chicago part-time professors

The board of trustees at City Colleges of Chicago endorsed the

decision by the school's chancellor, Wayne Watson, to fire 140 part-time professors who honored picket lines when full-time faculty struck last fall. Board chairman James Tyree called Watson a "very, very strong chancellor."

In reponse, full-time professors voted by 95 percent to call for Watson to be removed from his job. While the agreement with part-time professors bars sympathy strikes, the contract for full-time professors bans retaliation against "union members, students, clerks or any other person as a result of participation or non-participation" in a strike.

The faculty union says it has formed a solidarity committee of students and workers to launch a struggle to reinstate part-time faculty.

Alaska oil tech workers' strike ends

A six-month strike by eight tech workers at BP Exploration Inc. in Alaska ended when the energy giant agreed to add them to the 220-member bargaining unit of other BP workers at the Prudhoe Bay field. The workers also received their own three-year labor agreement.

According to the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) International Union Local 8-369, which represents BP workers, the strike was mainly over job security and not over pay. The strikers wanted layoff and seniority language similar to other unionized BP workers.

The walkout last August by tech workers led to equipment problems and resulted in a drop in crude oil production for September from the North Slope. PACE union members agreed to assess themselves higher dues in order to provide the strikers with full pay and benefits during the strike.

Concern over health of federal workplace inspectors

Acting Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Administrator Jonathan Snare said it would be "premature" to comment on whether any of the agency's 301 inspectors tested positive for chronic beryllium disease. Unofficial reports claim at least three inspectors have tested positive for blood abnormalities that make them susceptible.

Beryllium is a lightweight carcinogenic metal used in making microprocessors, golf clubs, dental alloys and other products in the military and nuclear industry. Critics have charged OSHA with foot dragging on the issue and thereby complicit in exposing its own inspectors to the disease.

Though the Department of Energy reduced exposure for workers at its plants to 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter of air, OSHA has continued to accept the old standard of 2 micrograms per cubic meter, which was set in 1971 and was based on the Atomic Energy Commission's 1949 standard. OSHA had begun work on setting a new standard in 1975, but the project was never completed. The *Washington Post* quoted Peter Lurie of the Public Citizen's Health Research Group: "The agency is in some kind of grand denial of the problem that extends to its own workers. Because they have not protected workers, they have put their own employees at risk."

Two dockworkers at Port of Los Angeles die in less than a week

Two port workers died and a third was injured last week at the Port of Los Angeles. Sixty-three-year-old Matt Petrasich was found dead by a crane operator on top of a cargo container, while

Conce Campbell, 52, was killed when he slipped under a train. A foreman, Cody Bates, 43, suffered serious leg injuries when he was struck by a crane.

Both the state and federal arms of OSHA are investigating the incidents. Danny Miranda, president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 94, blamed Petrasich's death on work overload and cutbacks in dock foremen.

Canada

Diageo workers on strike

On February 2, nearly 300 workers at Diageo, the world's largest alcohol beverage company located in Amherstburg, 16 miles south of Windsor, Ontario, went on strike after contract negotiations broke off the previous day over outsourcing and a management bid to reclassify workers to eliminate seniority rights. This is the first strike at the factory since 1979, when a work stoppage lasted three months. The workers, who are represented by Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 2098, say that employee-management relations have deteriorated rapidly since the corporation took over Seagrams in December 2001.

BC Place Stadium workers vote to strike

A total of 280 workers employed at BC Place Stadium in Vancouver, British Columbia, voted to reject the employer's final offer on February 5 by a margin of 95 percent for a strike that was scheduled for noon the next day. The members of BC Government Employees' Union are seeking wage and benefit improvements similar to those received by Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) workers, who won a 6 percent wage increase over three years in August of last year. The workers do maintenance at the stadium, provide hosting and security, and set up and take down equipment for shows and events at BC Place.

Tentative deal reached in Quebec liquor strike

The two sides in the three-month-long liquor strike in Quebec reached a tentative deal on February 5. Quebec Liquor Corporation management announced its agreement in principle with the union, tentatively settling a conflict that started on November 19 of last year over the issues of schedules and job guarantees for part-time workers. The 400 liquor stores could be reopened next week if the 3,800 striking workers accepted the deal and the back-to-work protocol. The union representing the workers is affiliated with the Confederation of National Trade Unions.



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