

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Nicaraguan teachers' strike ends

On Saturday, February 18, Nicaragua's 35,000 teachers ended their 19-day strike after the government agreed to increase wages. The government of President Enrique Bolaños agreed to increase monthly wages from US\$70 to US\$110 for an elementary school teacher and from US\$80 to US\$122 for secondary school teachers, beginning in December 2005.

Bolaños had insisted that an agreement with the International Monetary Fund prevented an increase in teachers' wages. However, the leader of the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) block in Congress, former President Daniel Ortega, together with leaders of the right-wing Constitutionalist Liberal Party, proposed last week that the gap be made up by cutting wages for government employees and using a US\$24,000 discretionary fund that each legislator receives each year for community programs. Bolaños quickly accepted the proposal.

Argentine construction workers block highways

Following a week of futile negotiations with two construction companies, construction workers in the Southern city of Rio Gallegos blocked traffic on Route 3, a main highway in the Province of Santa Cruz, to make the public aware of their wage struggle.

Brazilian construction workers strike

A strike by 60,000 construction workers has paralyzed over 80 construction projects in the northeastern city of Salvador. The workers are demanding a 13 percent wage increase. The workers have been without a contract since December 2004.

The decision to strike was voted on at a meeting of 500 delegates on February 17. The president of the Construction Industry Syndicate (SINDUSCON—an employers' group), Marcos Galindo, indicated that SINDUSCON was willing to negotiate with the workers both on wages and on working conditions, but he accused the striking workers of not considering that the industry has been suffering financial difficulties since 2001.

United States

Security guards armed with assault weapons harass Massachusetts pickets

Security guards wearing black fatigues and facemasks and toting assault rifles confronted unarmed pickets at a General Motors construction site in Norton, Massachusetts. The workers, members of Painters & Allied Trades District Council 35, were protesting the failure of painting contractor RJ Forbes to provide prevailing wages and benefits to workers at the GM site.

One of the guards waved his assault rifle and ammunition clips in front of the pickets while yelling "everyone should have one." The attempt to intimidate the pickets took place in front of two Norton police officers. The security guards work for Gray's Security Corporation of Attleboro.

Pacific island sweatshop workers strike over nonpayment of wages

Some 100 garment workers on the US territorial island of Saipan in the Western Pacific's Mariana Islands walked off the job February 14 claiming they haven't been paid since December. Workers are owed between \$1,500-\$2,000 in back wages by La Mode Inc.

Workers who gathered at the US Department of Labor's office in Saipan to complain about the abuse were told to wait until an investigation is completed. One worker told Marianas Variety, "They are not giving us answers. They told us to wait...but last time, like three or four weeks ago, they told us they were investigating. Now, they can't tell us anything."

Saipan has served as a haven for Asian Pacific sweatshops for major US retailers. By shipping from Saipan—a US territory—import barriers can be avoided. At the same time, the island's labor force is not protected by US labor law, resulting in windfall profits for manufacturers and retailers.

Increase in discrimination against women workers due to pregnancy

The National Partnership for Women & Families reports the number of women claiming workplace discrimination due to pregnancy rose by 39 percent from 1992 to 2003, according to data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The rate of increase makes it one of the fastest growing types of discrimination, despite the fact

the US birthrate has dropped by nine percent in the same period.

The complaints by women span job categories from the lowest to the highest. The pregnancies have triggered firing and denial of promotions, and in some cases management has urged women to terminate pregnancies.

Women now make up 47 percent of the total labor force and the Labor Department expects them to comprise more than half of the increase in total labor force growth during the 2002 to 2012 period.

During fiscal year 2003, the EEOC and other state agencies collected a total of \$12.4 million from cases involving pregnancy discrimination, compared to \$3.7 million in 1992. The report indicates that productivity pressures, the necessity for working class families to maintain two incomes, and stereotypes about pregnant women all contributed to the phenomenon.

Investigation into Ohio Construction accident reveals company negligence

Investigations into the February 16, 2004 toppling of a crane on a federal bridge project over the Maumee River in Ohio have revealed that the Fru-Con Construction Group was repeatedly warned by the crane's manufacturer that it was not properly anchoring the equipment.

Five months after the crane's collapse, which killed four construction workers, OSHA determined that Fru-Con had failed to follow the manufacturer's instructions and fined the company \$280,000. Investigations revealed Fru-Con received four emails in mid-2003 from Paolo de Nicola, the crane manufacturer, warning the company about lack of proper securing.

Fru-Con claims it took proper remedies following the warnings, but three construction workers have told investigators that after Paolo de Nicola officials returned to Italy, no anchorings were attached to the crane's rear legs.

Alabama McDonald's franchise fined for wage and child labor violations

A McDonald's franchise in Alabama agreed to pay the Labor Department \$101,915 in civil penalties and another \$38,800 in back wages to 574 workers. CLP Corporation, the largest McDonald's franchise in Alabama, with restaurants in Birmingham, Gadsden and Anniston, was found guilty of having minors operating trash compactors and driving vehicles.

Managers also had 14 and 15-year-old employees working more than three hours or later than 7 pm on school days. An investigation also showed that CLP had failed to pay employees for all hours worked.

Canada

Workers protest demolition of pulp mill

The demolition of the pulp mill in Miramichi, New

Brunswick scheduled for last week has been held up because of a protest by over 500 workers who blocked all five of the facility's gates. The workers, represented by Local 689 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), have been on strike since December 16 fighting the announced shutdown of the mill by Finnish-based UPM-Kymmene Corporation. The closure will reduce the company's workforce from about 1,200 to 800. UPM is carrying out restructuring in an effort to increase profitability by moving to harvesting publicly-owned forests in New Brunswick and transporting the logs to more modern mills in Newfoundland or the US.

BC workers strike against government employees union

On February 18 workers employed by the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU) walked off the job in Vancouver, British Columbia, protesting a proposed two-year wage freeze. BCGEU has linked a wage increase for its employees with an increase it is negotiating for its 2,000 members, college support workers who are currently on strike at six colleges in the province. An official of the union representing the strikers, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), said it is ironic that the government union is seeking a wage freeze when it was fighting a similar freeze demanded by the colleges.

Teaching assistants McMaster University set to strike

Over 1,850 teaching assistants at McMaster University in the city of Hamilton in southern Ontario will be in a legal strike position on February 28. The key issues in the dispute are rising tuition fees, job security, benefits and working conditions. Class sizes have been steadily rising at the school, leading to an excessive workload for teaching assistants. Ontario's freeze on tuition fees is set to end in September 2006, making future increases a key bargaining issue. Teaching assistants, whose last contract expired at the end of 2004, are members of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3906 (CUPE).



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