

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Latin America

### Fishers strike in northern Chile

On February 25, 200 fishers based in the port of Iquique, in northern Chile, began a strike of indefinite duration. The walkout was sparked by the fleet managers' refusal to address salary demands. The workers are demanding a base wage increase from 121,000 to 200,000 pesos (US\$350). They are also demanding that the commission per catch increase from 252 to 280 pesos (US\$0.48) per ton of fish.

Workers set up pickets throughout Iquique and at the headquarters of two fleet owners, Corpesca and Camanchaca. Packing workers refused to cross a picket line set up at the Camanchaca processing plant. Also supporting the strikers are Iquique stevedores, who set up picket lines in solidarity with the fishers.

At noon last Friday the strikers and their supporters carried out a spirited march through downtown Iquique, banging on large drums and displaying banners about the strike. On Saturday, the strikers organized a soup line at the port. The strike does not include boat operators and pilots, who negotiate separately with the fleets.

### Peruvian public health doctors to strike this week

Peruvian doctors employed by the government's public health system will begin a national strike on March 1. The strike is planned to last indefinitely and will involve 13,000 doctors that work in 300 hospitals and 1,400 health centers across Peru. The doctors are demanding the government put into effect a wage increase that was approved last year. In addition, the doctors' protest includes a demand for an increase in the government budget for public medical care.

### Mexican voice actors on strike

The Mexican voice actors that dub English-language TV shows, such as *The Simpsons*, went on strike Wednesday, February 23. Their employer, Grabaciones y Deoblajes Internacionales, has ceased to honor its exclusive contract with the National Actors Association (ANDA).

The dispute began late last year following a change of name for the firm. The old contract had been in effect for 40 years. ANDA leader Juan Imperio denounced company plans to have nonunion actors work side by side with ANDA members and indicated that was the only issue in this walkout.

Nonunion voice actors are generally hired on an "on-call" basis with no rights to steady employment, to pensions, or to medical and vacation benefits. They are paid by loops of words (a sound bite lasting 15 seconds, or containing 25 words), with no salary guarantee. In comparison, ANDES members do enjoy limited benefits.

For the time being, some Mexican TV stations have suspended presentation of some of the dubbed shows, in response to popular support for the voice artists and hostility to strikebreakers.

### Death threat against leaders of Argentine ceramic union

Last Saturday at dawn, Raul Godoy, the general secretary of the Ceramic Workers Union, his wife Carolina Dominguez, and union employee Alejandro Lopez received death threats over the telephone. The call was discovered at noon when Ms. Dominguez activated the telephone answering machine.

The Ceramic Workers Union is leading the occupation of the Zanon Ceramics plant in Neuquen, Argentina. The workers occupied that plant to prevent its closure in 2001 and have operated it ever since, despite repeated attempts by management and government authorities to expel the workers and remove the machinery from the plant.

Godoy indicated that this is the latest escalation in a series of hostile telephone messages received by the union. The rambling message also mentioned the Workers Party for Socialism (PTS), which Godoy supports. "We are going to kill you," said the recording.

Godoy linked the message to a speech by Provincial Security Minister Luis Manganaro, who called the Zanon strikers "delinquents."

### Argentine zinc workers face company attacks

Workers at the Sulfacid Zink processing plant went on strike on February 24 and 25 to demand the rehiring of three union delegates. They were part of a group of six that were suspended in July 2004 as a consequence of an 18-day strike over wages and working conditions sparked because the company was not paying a court-ordered 34 percent increase in pay as compensation for unhealthy working conditions.

As part of an agreement brokered by government authorities, all workers were to be reincorporated unless the company could prove just cause by the beginning of February. The company ignored the deadline. The plant lies in the industrial belt that surrounds Rosario, Argentina's third-largest city.

On January 26, Sulfacid workers erected a tent in front of the plant to press for the reinstatement of their comrades. Nine workers manning the tent were attacked by 100 police, who also entered the plant to forestall any protest by the workers. These acts of repression led to the decision by the Chemical and Petrochemical Workers Union (SQP) to call the strike.

Sulfacid is the only zinc producer in Argentina. The plant is notorious for its hazardous working conditions that have led to high rates of cancer among its employees. According to some estimates, 12 percent of the workers there have some form of toxicity in their blood. In addition to zinc, arsenic and lead are also present in high concentrations in the plant, resulting in lung and stomach ailments among the workers.

### Argentine press workers launch independent agency

The workers at the Infosic Press Agency took over their press offices 50 days ago to forestall massive layoffs by management. An assembly of press workers decided to reopen the press agency under workers' control this week under the name Infosic en lucha (Infosic in struggle). A group of press entrepreneurs had taken over the agency

and announced its closure on January 7, sacking all the workers. Infosc employees suspect that the closure of the press agency is part of a plan to reduce the existing number of media agencies and replace permanent employees with independent contractors that work on a temporary basis.

The Infosc workers have been supported by other elements of this media conglomerate. The workers at *Veintitres* magazine, which was also acquired by the same group, demanded a rapid solution to the dispute and insisted that every opening go to a displaced Infosc worker. Last week, workers from the Argentine media met and called for the Buenos Aires Press Workers Union (UTPBA) to mobilize the entire industry in a struggle to stop “the hemorrhage of layoffs” in the industry.

#### **Argentine teachers set to strike this week**

Hundreds of teachers marched through the streets of Rosario demanding a monthly wage increase of 250 pesos (US\$86) and the folding of bonuses into the wage scale. The teachers have rejected a bonus proposed by the governor of Santa Fe province, Jorge Obeid, of 100 pesos payable to all provincial employees, in part because it will not be reflected in base wages.

The teachers, members of the Teachers Association of Santa Fe Province (AMSAFE), intend to strike March 2, the first day of school in Argentina. AMSAFE leaders indicated that the strikes will last 72 hours in the course of the next two weeks. Rosario AMSAFE has called on workers to organize rallies in support of the teachers throughout the city.

#### **Ecuadorian public health doctors protest**

Thousands of striking public health doctors marched on February 24 through the streets of Quito, Ecuador’s capital city, demanding wage increases. Similar marches and rallies took place in other cities across the country. The health workers went on strike February 21. During the march, doctors denounced government corruption, declaring that the government of Lucio Gutierrez always has enough money to afford shady deals with contractors, while claiming that there is no money for medical care. “Lucio, listen or resign!” shouted the marching doctors.

#### **United States**

##### **New Jersey garbage strike ends**

The strike by 186 trash-haulers in Mercer County, New Jersey, ended in its seventh week after workers voted by a 102-60 margin to go back to work under terms of the latest offer by Waste Management. Exact details were not available, but according to reports, for many workers the company’s concessions on wages and pensions did not make up for the inferior medical package.

Teamsters Local 701 President Ernie Soehl told the *Trentonian* newspaper, “Based on how the membership voted, I guess they felt comfortable with it.” But several workers standing outside the hall where votes were cast told the paper they had been “sold out.”

Under previous contracts, drivers and “throwers” had been paid different amounts for doing the same work. The new agreement equalizes the different wage ratios in the fourth year of the contract. The agreement also provided a 401(k) retirement savings plan for the first time.

##### **Tentative agreement in St. Louis Symphony work stoppage**

Members of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra will be voting on a new agreement March 1 that could bring the eight-week work stoppage to a close. The tentative contract came hours after the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued a ruling, based on a technicality, that the strike was illegal.

Musicians originally voted 85-3 against management’s first contract offer back on January 3. Management responded by changing the locks on the doors at Powell Symphony Hall and canceled auditions, which led musicians to charge management with initiating a lockout.

An agreement last week raised musicians’ salaries to \$80,000, but union members refused to vote on it due to other objections and sent negotiators back to the bargaining table to hammer out the latest agreement.

#### **Deadlock in Minnesota teachers’ strike**

Mediated talks between officials for the Crosby-Ironton, Minnesota, teachers and the school district broke off February 24 without an agreement in the two-and-a-half-week-old strike. The two sides are stalemated over issues such as salaries and health insurance for both retirees and current teachers.

The school district has proposed a two-year agreement with wage increases of zero in the first year and 2.2 percent in the second, while Education Minnesota, which represents teachers, has proposed zero and 4.65 percent. The school district wants to eliminate health insurance for retirees, something that teachers are adamantly opposed to, after having made past wage concessions to maintain the benefit.

The school district has been mounting a campaign to reopen the school with strikebreakers. Twenty-five first graders were bused in to class February 24. One day earlier, the school district was forced to cancel plans to reopen classes for juniors and seniors when not enough replacements were lined up.

#### **Canada**

##### **Quebec court finds Wal-Mart anti-union**

A recent ruling by the Quebec labor relations board cited retail giant Wal-Mart for intimidating and harassing workers at the Sainte-Foy outlet of the plant near Quebec City where a unionization drive is under way. The ruling comes only days after the company announced it would be closing its Jonquiere store, also in Quebec, which was the first outlet in North America to gain union status.

The ruling works against Wal-Mart efforts to counter public perception of it as anti-union. The company recently embarked on a public relations campaign across the continent to answer critics who have condemned the company for its labor practices and anti-union tactics. Workers at the Quebec outlets are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), which is currently trying to get certification at more than a dozen of Wal-Mart’s 235 stores in Canada.

##### **Fort Vermilion teachers vote to accept mediator’s recommendations**

On February 18, teachers at Fort Vermilion School Division in the province of Alberta voted 88 percent in favor of accepting the settlement terms recommended by a government-appointed mediator. Their previous contract expired 18 months ago. On February 7, they had announced their intention to walk out over the issues of back pay, establishing wage levels that would attract teachers and retain them in the district, and including clauses in the collective agreement dealing with working conditions. The teachers are members of the Alberta Teachers Association.



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