

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 April 2005

Latin America

Customs agents strike in Chile

On Friday, April 22, 1,300 employees of Chile's Customs went on strike. At issue was the government's refusal to address workers' promotion demands. Union leader Lautaro Aguila said that customs workers are demanding that inside candidates be given preferences in job assignments. Aguila said that Friday's job action had been 75 percent successful.

Ecuadorian doctors return to work

After eight weeks on strike, public health workers in Ecuador returned to work on April 20. The strike issues included demands for funding for public hospitals and clinics, payment of back wages to doctors, and a wage increase.

The end of the strike coincided with the overthrow of President Lucio Gutierrez. Before his removal, Gutierrez had threatened to fire the strikers.

Brazilian construction workers on strike

On April 18, construction workers in the city of Fortaleza in northern Brazil went on strike. On Monday, the 300 strikers voted to stay out. Workers are fighting against a management plan that would extend their working week to 48 hours, up from the current 44 hours. Under the plan, construction workers would work 8-hour days from Monday through Saturday. The workers are also demanding an increase in pay. So far, management has offered only a 3.1 percent raise.

Currently, negotiations are stalemated. The industry association has taken the position that workers must first return to work before any talks take place. On April 20, more than 400 strikers rallied in the center of the city to press their demands.

United States

Wisconsin company threatens to move if strike isn't settled

The management of Johnson Truck Bodies threatened to move out of Rice Lake, Wisconsin, unless the union representing 267 striking workers comes to terms. "If

Johnson Truck Bodies isn't here, it'll be somewhere else, and jobs will be lost in this community," said the company's general manager, Ron Ricci.

According to Teamsters Union Local 662, Johnson Truck is demanding deep cuts in health insurance benefits and increased deductibles for workers. It is also offering a three-year contract with no wage increases in the first year and 10 cent increases in years two and three.

But the Teamsters bureaucracy broke off negotiations only when the company insisted on instituting an open shop and dropping the dues checkoff, whereby the company deducts union dues from workers' paychecks. Johnson Truck was purchased by Carlisle Companies in June of 1999. It manufactures fiberglass bodies for the trucking industry.

Yale University official rebuffs grad students' request for a meeting

The chairman of the Yale Corporation, the university's trustees, rejected any meeting with members of the Graduate Employee and Student Organization at the end of a week-long strike by teaching assistants. The Yale strike, in New Haven, Connecticut, was launched simultaneously with a strike by teaching and research assistants at Columbia University, another Ivy League school in New York City.

Last year, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that graduate students at private colleges are students, not workers, and therefore cannot unionize. From a legal standpoint, teachers' assistants can formally unionize only under conditions where Yale voluntarily enters into an agreement.

It is widely believed that a majority of Columbia graduate assistants voted in support of unionization in March 2002, when National Labor Relations Board law permitted teaching and research assistants to unionize. But Columbia University administrators had the ballots impounded until 2004, when the Bush administration

effected a change in composition at the NLRB that reversed the labor law and barred university graduate assistants from unionization.

Lumber company closes, union to implement ESOP

The president of the union representing striking lumber workers in Rainelle, West Virginia, announced his union is making preparations to implement an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESPO) after the company, Meadow Rivers Hardwood Lumber, announced plans to close down its operations.

The 50-day strike was sparked by Meadow River Hardwood management insisting that workers shoulder higher costs for health care.

The ESOP is being billed by the union as a way of putting the operation “under the ownership” of workers. However, such employee ownership schemes inevitably turn out to be a sham. The ESOPs are used to saddle workers with non-profitable operations, shifting the debt burden from management to the workers.



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