

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Argentine unions turn their back on Salta teachers

Argentine Education Minister Daniel Filmus declared April 16 the seven-week strike by Salta Province public school teachers to be over. A negotiated agreement appears to have been signed. The settlement provides a 320 peso monthly base wage plus a guarantee that no teacher will receive less than 712 pesos (\$US230). This represents a setback for teachers, who had demanded a base wage of 750 pesos. The base wage determines retirement pay.

The new agreement represents a betrayal of the Salta teachers by the Argentine trade union bureaucracy. Despite repeated appeals, the National Teachers Union refused to provide resources or mobilize its membership in support of the striking teachers.

From the beginning of the strike on March 1, the policy of the Salta government was to savagely repress the strikers. The latest incident was an attack by goons on teachers blocking the international bridge that links Argentina and Bolivia. The attackers, ostensibly truck drivers, were reportedly organized by state police officials.

Ecuador government fires striking doctors

On April 15, Ecuadorian authorities announced that public health doctors on strike for over eight weeks would be fired. The doctors are fighting for better wages. The Communications Ministry announced that it would begin processing applications to replace the strikers.

Over 120,000 public health doctors began their strike on February 21. The doctors are demanding that President Lucio Gutierrez fulfill a promise made last year to raise wages. The government claims that it lacks the resources.

Hunger strike by Nicaraguan agricultural laborers

About 50 Nicaraguan banana plantation workers camped out in front of the National Congress and declared themselves on a hunger strike on April 15. The strike is to

protest the use of pesticides toxic to human life in the banana plantations in the 1970s and 1980s. Over 3,000 workers are suffering from cancers directly linked to the use of "Nemagon," a pesticide that, though banned for use in the United States, was used by the transnational banana companies in Nicaragua.

The hunger strikers are demanding compensation and medical benefits for all the affected workers. The leader of the hunger strikers, Victorino Espinales, indicated that more workers will join the protest this week and the action will be expanded next week. Other workers are planning to barricade highways.

On April 14, Nicaragua's Human Rights ombudsman, Omar Cabezas, presented a grievance to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva accusing the government of Enrique Bolaños of having abandoned the victims of the banana companies.

United States

Labor board rules for reinstatement of workers at North Carolina meatpacking plant

A National Labor Relations judge ordered meat processor Smithfield Foods in Tar Heel, North Carolina, along with its cleaning contractor QSI, Inc., to reinstate 14 workers who had been unlawfully discharged and pay them their lost wages and benefits.

Smithfield had been running a scheme whereby cleaning workers were promised raises after completing six-month and one-year work periods. But at the end of these periods, QSI would fire them for minor infractions. Later, the company would rehire them at their \$6-an-hour starting wage. When a sympathetic manager refused to fire a worker and the company responded by firing the manager, workers walked out en masse. QSI ended the walkout by promising a \$1 raise.

One week later, QSI attempted to fire ringleaders of the walkout. When workers attempted to again stage a walkout against the victimizations, Smithfield police blocked entrances, leading to what the United Food and Commercial Workers union has described as a "riot-like situation."

Service workers strike University of California campuses

More than 7,000 service workers at University of California (UC) campuses walked out April 14 on a one-day strike to protest university management's failure, after two years of negotiations, to reach an agreement. The walkout was supported by sympathy strike actions from members of the Coalition of University Employees, the University Professional and Technical Employees, students and construction workers.

Some 22 percent of UC workers earn less than \$10 an hour. Members on average earn \$23,317 per year and have gone two years without a raise.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299, which represents UC service workers, has asked for a 20 percent wage increase over three years. University management has conceded that workers are underpaid, but insist that wages must be constrained, given a 16 percent decline in state support to the UC system.

California nurses locked out after one-day strike

Management at the Scripps Memorial Hospital Encinitas locked out nurses for four days after members of the California Nurses Association called a one-day protest strike April 14. Nurses are demanding management agree to the establishment of a nurses' committee to provide oversight of staffing and working conditions at the hospital, located north of San Diego. Nurses are also demanding increased retiree benefits, an end to merit-based pay, and a closed shop.

Scripps Memorial management has hired 100 replacement nurses from the staffing firm On Assignment to replace nurses during the lockout. Normally the hospital requires about 130 nurses to fulfill its staffing requirements.

Nurses voted by 94 percent back in February to reject the hospital's final offer. The hospital was first unionized in 2003 and 32 negotiating sessions have failed to bring about an agreement.

Pennsylvania aerospace workers strike

Members of United Steel Workers Local 5652-03 went on strike April 11 against Smiths Aerospace Components in Wright Township. The union's 70 members had voted unanimously the previous day to strike the London-based manufacturer of components for aircraft engines.

Negotiations remain deadlocked over wages and pension benefits, but healthcare has proved to be the most intractable issue. Smiths Aerospace management wants workers to shoulder a co-pay that will increase yearly.

According to the USWA, a worker with a family would have to pay \$190 a month by the third year of the company's proposal. No new negotiating sessions had been scheduled as of last week.

Canada

Lakehead University staff begins strike

About 60 maintenance workers at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay in northern Ontario went on strike April 11. The workers including custodians, groundskeepers and others, are represented by Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 229. Contract negotiations between the university and the union had broken off the previous Wednesday over the issue of a university proposal to allow future positions to be contracted out to non-unionized workers. The direct trigger of the strike seems to have been the university's hiring of contract workers to clean washrooms.

West Quebec teachers organize one-day strike

Teachers at French-language elementary and high schools across West Quebec staged a one-day strike on April 14 as a part of a strategy of rotating strikes affecting elementary and high schools and CEGEPs (Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel), pre-university and vocational schools. The teachers, whose contract expired in June 2003, are increasing the job action because negotiations have still not resolved the main issues after 20 months. They are demanding smaller class sizes and more resources for students with special needs.

Quebec francophone teachers were scheduled to walk out April 19, and on May 6 all French and English-speaking teachers will picket in front of the National Assembly—the provincial parliament—in the province's capital, Quebec City. The strike took place amidst an ongoing protest campaign by students in the province against the provincial Liberal government.



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