

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 May 2005

## Latin America

### Mexican sweatshop workers threaten to strike

Five hundred workers at the “Peace Industries” plant in Chihuahua, Mexico are threatening to strike over the unjustified firing of eight workers at this maquiladora. The discharged workers were union organizers.

### Hunger strike in Chile

Five female union workers at La Ideal industrial laundry in Calama, Chile went on hunger strike April 27 and are threatening to go without liquids this Monday unless their demand for a 10 percent raise is addressed. Management has offered 0.8 percent. Under Chilean regulations, management’s offer represented an insufficient counterproposal, leading to a government fine.

The women resorted to a hunger strike after repeatedly trying unsuccessfully to meet with management. In response, management reprimanded them for attempting to negotiate.

### Argentine health workers to strike

The Union of Health Workers (SITRASA) in Argentina’s northern Formosa province announced a 48-hour strike to begin May 2. SITRASA leaders said this is the third strike to demand wage increases to compensate for the rising cost of living.

Workers are fighting the wage freeze currently in effect and low family stipends. Health workers in the Provinces of Neuquen and Buenos Aires are also on strike over wages.

### Strike by dairy workers in Chile

Over 300 workers at the SOPROLE Dairy near Santiago are on strike demanding higher wages in an action that began April 5. Workers say that management is violating a contract signed with maintenance workers at the dairy. For its part the company holds that wages are now tied to productivity increases and that workers have not met their targets.

The new payment procedures were first agreed to in 2003. Workers are expected to meet “key performance

indicators.” In return bonuses were handed out every three months. The biggest bonuses were given to team managers. This year management raised the bar and workers found that they could not meet the goals. For maintenance workers the problem was compounded by the fact that management stopped buying sufficient spare parts to keep machines in proper functioning order.

More than half the strikers earn less than US\$345 a month. It is difficult for them to predict what their wages will be from month to month, since this depends on the productivity formula. Many of the workers are forced to labor seven days a week and more than four Sundays in a row; something against the law in Chile.

### Argentine auto workers to begin job actions

The Mechanics Union (SMATA) announced that beginning May 2 it would stage protest strikes in plants operated by Daimler-Chrysler, Volkswagen, Ford and General Motors.

Each day the strike will increase by one hour. On May 11 the strike will be all day. SMATA is demanding a US\$700 monthly wage for the lower job categories.

## United States

### Waste Management workers strike over company harassment

Empire Waste Management workers at sites in Santa Rosa and Sacramento, California went out on strike April 28 charging management with harassment and withholding wages and tool allowances. Operating Engineers Local 3, which represents about 130 truck drivers, mechanics dispatchers and sorters, labeled the action an unfair labor practice strike.

In 2004, the National Labor Relations Board ruled in favor of the union and Empire Waste Management signed an agreement pledging to end harassment and bad faith bargaining. But the company’s campaign resumed within a short period of time. Management is accused of interrogating workers suspected of

supporting the union. It also seeks to approach workers on an individual basis to deal with wage increases and has sabotaged union negotiations for two years. The company also refuses to allow the union to post messages on a bulletin board.

The president of Local 3, Frank Herrera, assailed the company's tactics, saying, "These are nineteenth century union-busting tactics being used by a \$21 billion company, in 2005, right here in our own community."

### **Sickout by bus drivers in Philadelphia**

Forty bus drivers for Council Rock in suburban Philadelphia called in sick April 29 over conflicts with the Ohio-based contractor First Student. The action affected some 155 daily runs that provide transportation to about 14,000 students at both public and private schools.

First Student compelled both mechanics and office personnel to fill in during the sickout. Teamsters Local 115, which represents the drivers, has made no comment. The Council Rock school district will pay First Student some \$7.2 million during the 2004-2005 school year to transport students.

### **Labor report highlights job-related deaths among workers**

The AFL-CIO released a report covering the year 2003 that cites Wyoming as ranking first in worker death rates on the job and Texas as ranking number one for deaths among Hispanics. The report, "Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect, a National State-by-State Profile of Worker Safety and Health in the United States," found Wyoming had a death toll of 33 workers or a death rate of 13.9 per 100,000 workers. Following Wyoming were Montana and Alaska. The fatalities involved mining, construction and exposure to harmful substances.

Texas, which ranked 24th among the 50 states in worker fatalities, was singled out for having the highest death toll among Hispanics in 2003. Texas had 491 deaths out of the nationwide total of 5,559, with 163 of them representing workers of Hispanic origin. It marked a 48 percent increase from 1992 and reflects the growing oppression of immigrant workers who toil in the most dangerous industries. California and Florida ranked second and third respectively behind Texas in Hispanic deaths.

### **Canada**

### **Quebec teachers stage one-day strike**

Quebec teachers at most of the province's CEGEP (Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel) schools—public schools at the senior high school level—walked out on April 25 in a one-day strike. The main issue is reduced funding, which causes many problems, including low salaries, insufficient money for renovations, and oversized classes. While the typical class size used to be about 30 students, now it can be over 40, sometimes up to 45. Negotiations with the province have been continuing for three years. The walkout is part of a union strategy of rotating strikes affecting elementary and high schools and CEGEPs across the province. French-language teachers walked out on April 14 and teachers of Quebec's English-language system went on a strike on April 19. A one-day general strike of the province's teachers is scheduled for May 6.

The CEGEP system includes 48 pre-university and vocational schools across the province.

### **Ottawa high school teachers vote to strike**

Over 1,700 teachers with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board voted 86 percent in favor of a strike on April 28. The teachers are represented by Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), whose previous contract expired last year in August. The strike vote comes after 12 days of negotiations failed to resolve the issues of workload and compensation.



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