

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 May 2005

Latin America

Mexico: march against police repression; massive May Day march in Chiapas

On May 6, 600 teachers and health workers marched to protest police repression in Palenque, Mexico, against strikes by teachers and mental health employees. At issue was the use of police to surround the city's general hospital on May 5. The demonstrators compared Pablo Salazar, the governor of Chiapas state, to Hitler.

Palenque Mayor Salgado Correa assumed responsibility for calling the police against the strikers. He applauded the governor and blamed health workers for the poor state of health services in the state.

Speakers at the rally indicated that Chiapas authorities are refusing to negotiate over the strikers' demands, which, in addition to higher wages, include a general increase in the health and education budgets. Roberto Pinto of the teachers' union indicated that the government is spending millions to repress the workers. Mauro Colli Dzib, also from the teachers' union, compared Salazar with the repressive governors of the fifteenth century in Mexico.

The Palenque demonstration came on the heels of a massive May Day protest in nearby Tuxtla Gutierrez in Chiapas state that drew in 100,000 workers. The workers' march dwarfed an official May Day celebration organized by "charro" unions—corrupt unions linked to the Revolutionary Institutional Party. Chanting "this march is no party [fiesta], it is a protest [protesta]," the demonstration set itself apart from the scores of government-sanctioned "celebrations" that took place throughout the country. The 20-block-long march denounced Governor Salazar for slashing medical care, education and public workers' pensions.

The teachers' union organized the May Day march, which included teachers, peasants, medical workers, communications workers and students.

Argentine government employees demand decent wages

Public employees, members of the Association of Government Employees (ATE), demonstrated in Buenos Aires on May 6 by blocking traffic in the center of the city during the noon rush hour. The mobilization represents an escalation in the ATE's campaign for a 30 percent increase in wages and for permanent status for 27,000 temporary workers.

The ATE reports that there has been no wage increase for most public employees since 1992. Those who earned less than 1,000 pesos a month (US\$330) did receive a 250-peso increase, which was not added to base wages. The ATE plans more protests in Buenos Aires this week.

ATE leaders also announced protests in Santa Fe province this week and threatened to launch a national strike in mid-May.

Dominican public health doctors protest

On May 5, a two-day strike by public health doctors paralyzed 173 hospitals in the Dominican Republic. At issue are doctors' demands for a wage increase, repairs to government hospitals and an end to the scarcity of vital medications and consumable items. A government announcement that it would subsidize the construction of a private clinic with a 25-million-peso (US\$900,000) grant sparked the protest.

May Day marches in Central America

More than 150,000 workers across Central America protested against a

proposed Central American Free Trade Treaty with the United States. One of the largest marches took place in Honduras, where an estimated 70,000 workers marched through the streets of Tegucigalpa demanding an end to price increases in goods that workers consume. In El Salvador, 40,000 workers and students also condemned US intervention in Colombia and Venezuela. Tens of thousands also marched in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Panama.

Costa Rica has yet to ratify the free trade agreement, which obligates Central American countries to open up their markets to US products while imposing restrictions on the exports of textiles and agricultural products into the United States. Costa Rican trade unions plan a national strike against the agreement on May 16.

Massive May Day mobilization in Colombia

Tens of thousands marched in many Colombian cities on May 1 in a massive protest against the policies of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. Fifteen thousand took to the streets in Bogota, 10,000 marched in Medellin, 5,000 in Cali—Colombia's three most important cities. In the oil center of Barrancabermeja, more than 7,000 oil workers participated in the protests. Another 5,000 marched in the port city of Barranquilla; 3,500 protested in the southern city of Pasto.

In each of these marches, workers defied a massive intimidation by police and military forces. This included setting up barricades to prevent people from reaching the site of the May Day protests and so-called preventive detention of people en route to the protests who, in the opinion of the police, carried signs that "appeared suspicious."

In Pasto and Barranquilla, the police assaulted the protests, resulting in arrests of scores of demonstrators and the wounding of many others. In Bogota, riot police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas, rubber bullets and confusion grenades. The latter had been declared illegal by previous Colombian governments. However, under the notorious Plan Colombia, the Uribe administration has approved them for use.

Reports indicate that the police singled out young workers and students for especially brutal treatment. At Plaza Bolivar, the traditional rallying area for May Day events, police on horseback cleared a path for a heavily armed contingent of riot police. Scores were wounded, among whom were teenage youth.

A common theme of all these protests was the defense of public health, education and social programs, all of which have been slashed by the Uribe government. Many signs also condemned the government's draconian "anti-terrorism" legislation that is being used to suppress democratic rights and repress political parties. Participants vowed to help defeat President Uribe in the coming elections.

Peruvian journalists protest against threats to press freedom

On May 6, journalists rallied at the Palace of Justice in Lima to protest a court sentence for "defamation of character" against Sally Bowen and Jane Holligan. The British journalists have written a book on Vladimiro Montesinos, the former security chief under the government of Alberto Fujimori. In one sentence of the book, they quoted a US official who called Fernando Zevallos a drug dealer. Zevallos, a notorious Peruvian entrepreneur, founded and owned AeroContinente, a Peruvian airline. He is suspected by Peruvian and US drug authorities of being a drug kingpin. Zevallos sued, and Bowen and Holligan were fined 10,000 soles. Bowen,

a 16-year resident of Lima, was also placed on probation for a year with restrictions on her ability to travel.

Unions representing journalists declared that they will not permit organized crime to silence journalists and vowed that journalists would redouble their investigations of Zevallos. Journalists at the rally compared the court's decision to the repressive measures that were routinely used by the Fujimori government against the press. Were this sentence to stand, many Peruvian reporters could be pressured into silence regarding Zevallos. At the rally, reporters and journalists declared their determination not to be intimidated.

Zellavos has returned to court, claiming that the sentence meted out against Bowen is not harsh enough. Bowen and Holligan's book (*The Imperfect Spy: Vladimiro Montesinos' Sinister Spider Web*) recounts Montesinos's exploits on behalf of the Fujimori dictatorship. Currently, Montesinos is in jail and Fujimori is in exile.

Thousands march for land reform in Brazil

Thousands of agricultural workers are marching to Brasilia to press for reform laws that would distribute land to peasant farmers. The 200-km march began in Goias on May 1 and is expected to reach the nation's capital on May 17. Upon reaching Brasilia, the peasants and rural workers plan to petition President Luiz Inacio da Silva (Lula) for an agrarian reform law.

United States

United Airlines threatens to fire strikers

An attorney for United Airlines said May 6 that management would fire any workers who might strike the bankrupt airline in the wake of this week's pending bankruptcy decision. United plans to ask a bankruptcy judge May 10 to nullify contracts for its 41,000 mechanics and flight attendants.

The unions have said that if their labor contracts are thrown out, they will be relieved from any proscriptions of the Railway Labor Act and take strike action. However, United is seeking to both void labor contracts and get the courts to also enforce the Railway Labor Act's provisions to bar workers from striking.

Last month, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation agreed to take over United's pension plans, saving United \$645 million annually while costing workers some \$3.2 billion in benefits.

Maine drivers strike against DHL union-busting

Nearly 50 employees of the DHL delivery company are continuing their strike in Brewer, Maine. The workers were fired in March after trying to join the Teamsters union.

The DHL employees, working under the auspices of local contractors Black Bear Courier in Brewer (23 employees) and Presque Isle (25 employees), had joined Teamsters Local 340 based in South Portland in a bid to gain health insurance and higher wages. One week later, in mid-March, DHL severed its contract with Black Bear Courier and shifted it to Rydbom Express of Pennsylvania.

Though DHL's director of communications told the *Bangor Daily News* that "these changes were unrelated to any union activity," the fired workers said that they were victimized. Fired Rydbom/DHL employee Karen McNermey told the paper last month that the new Rydbom manager had "grabbed my lapel and flipped it over. He said he was looking for a union pin. Then he asked me if I voted for the union." Workers further stated that the new management requested a list of union and nonunion members. Of the 28 workers fired in Brewer during the contract changeover, 23 of them had voted for unionization. They were not rehired and were denied severance pay and extended health insurance.

UAW strikes Michigan parts plant

Auto parts workers at Wedin International in Cadillac, Michigan, went on strike May 7. According to United Auto Workers (UAW), pay is not the issue. Rather, the union leadership is pursuing a relationship with the parts plant similar to the corporatism it has pursued with the Big Three

automakers.

International representative Rob Naugle told the *Cadillac News*, "Our issue is that we wanted to be partners in the business, help secure work and do more to eliminate waste." Naugle claims that Wedin workers want "a voice in improving productivity."

UAW Local 2101 represents 17 workers at Wedin, where they manufacture ball screws, nuts, gears, shafts, splines and motion-control systems.

Canada

Ottawa taxi drivers on strike

About 920 taxi drivers working for Blue Line, Ottawa's largest taxi service, went on strike on May 2, boycotting the city's Coventry Connections dispatch service. This means the 525 Blue Line's taxis will still be on the road for 24 hours a day, but they will refuse to take fares that call in for taxi service. If the strike lasts longer than a week, cab drivers are planning to establish their own dispatch service.

According to Yusef Al Mezel, president of the Canadian Auto Workers Local 1688 representing the drivers, the drivers are concerned that Coventry Connections plans to increase dispatch fees and plate and taxi stand rentals by 32 percent, while operating costs for cabbies have increased due to rising gas prices, insurance costs, and a new bylaw that prohibits cars from being on the road for more than six years.

Coventry Connections has already been through labor disputes earlier this year with drivers at two of its other companies, Blue Line Gloucester and Capital.

Montreal Symphony set to strike

The musicians of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, represented by the Montreal Musicians Guild, a unit of the American Federation of Musicians, are scheduled to go on strike May 9. They have been without a contract since August 2003 and voted in favor of a strike action in September of last year. The central issue in dispute involves work rules. Under the scheduling demanded by management, musicians would have to work more consecutive days than allowed by Canadian labor laws.

Another issue, according to the union, is management's proposal to extend a pay freeze that was introduced in 2002 for another two years, with a salary increase of only 0.9 percent in the following two years.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact