

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 May 2005

Latin America

Argentine teachers demand education funds

On May 20, Argentine public school teachers carried out their first national strike since President Nestor Kirchner took power two years ago. Striking teachers from across the nation rallied in front of Congress to demand an increase in the budget for primary and secondary education, from 3 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product, which would require an investment of 9,000 million pesos (US\$3 billion). The massive demonstration paralyzed the city center.

Union leaders indicated that 90 percent of the teachers participated across the country. The Ministry of Education disputed that figure, saying that the participation rate had been 35 percent, with very high rates of participation in Buenos Aires and other major cities.

Following the teachers' protest, university professors and students marched to Plaza de Mayo square, across from Government House, to demand an increase in university salaries and in the budget for higher education.

Mexican TV workers strike over back pay

About 300 workers employed by Channel 40 in Mexico City are on strike over the payment of back wages. The job action began on May 19. The workers, employed by Channel 40 and by the Corporation of News and Information (CNI), are owed about six months pay, plus bonuses and other allowances. The total in arrears amounts to about \$US4 million.

Channel 40, near bankruptcy, has a partnership agreement with Azteca TV, one of the nation's main networks. A dispute in 2001 led to a civil suit by Azteca TV. In July 2001 a Mexican court sided with the network and ordered Channel 40 to pay US\$35 million to Azteca. The dispute has yet to be fully resolved. In April, Azteca announced that it was buying Channel 40's shares. In the interim, Channel 40's level of indebtedness with its employees increased.

Bank employees strike in Argentina

Argentine bank employees paralyzed banking activity across the country on May 19 in a strike to press for a 30

percent wage increase and a 7.5-hour workday. The strike began in the wake of deadlocked negotiations between the Bank Association (AB) that represents the workers and representatives of management. AB leaders have declared that if negotiations continue at an impasse, another strike will take place on May 26 and 27.

The strike took place despite a binding arbitration order from the Labor Ministry. To press their demand the workers also marched and protested in Buenos Aires's "City," paralyzing the stock exchange and other financial markets.

Death threats against Colombian reporters

Last week several Colombian reporters received death threats from an anonymous source. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) the threats constitute an attack on press freedom. On May 16, three well-known reporters, Hollman Morris, Daniel Coronell and Carlos Lozano, received funeral wreaths together with notes of condolences. So far no organization has taken responsibility for the threats. HRW is calling on the government of President Alvaro Uribe to find and arrest the perpetrators. One of the reporters, Hollman Morris, is this year's recipient of the Hellman-Hammett award given by HRW in recognition of reporters that risk their lives to inform on human rights. Morris is associated with a controversial television program, "Contravia," that reports on Colombia's civil war, uncovering human rights violations.

Daniel Coronell, also threatened, directs "Noticias Uno," a popular news program, and writes for the newsmagazine "Semana." Carlos Lozano directs the left-wing "Colombia Voz" newspaper.

General strike in Bolivia

Bolivian workers have mobilized to prevent a widely rumored military coup against the government of President Carlos Mesa. Throughout last week the country has been under a general strike by miners, oil workers and other unions to demand the nationalization of Bolivia's oil and natural gas industries. While the unions oppose Mesa, they fear that a military coup would push through

right-wing pro-business measures, including handing over natural gas to foreign companies.

Miners also plan to join a civic protest this week by citizens of El Alto, north of La Paz, who have declared their intention to campaign for the nationalization of the energy sector.

On May 18, 500 miners and El Alto residents who were engaged in a protest march in La Paz fought the Bolivian police, who were equipped with tear gas and rubber bullets. The miners had decided to suspend a congress of the Bolivian Miners Syndicalist Federation (FSTMB) in the city of Oruro to join the social mobilizations over the nationalization of the energy industry.

United States

Massachusetts utility workers strike

Workers for Nstar, the natural gas and electrical utility giant that supplies power to eastern Massachusetts, went on strike May 17 after failing to resolve contract differences. About 1,900 members of the Utility Workers Union Local 369 are protesting the company's health care proposal and the failure to maintain adequate staffing levels in order to provide preventive maintenance to the system.

The low staffing levels force workers to put in exhausting amounts of overtime. The company admits lack of maintenance contributed to a series of accidents involving stray voltage and underground explosions.

Union head demands workers bail out Northwest Airlines

The head of the pilots union at Northwest Airlines issued an ultimatum to the carrier's workforce that they must grant concessions to the ailing company. "The fact is our company is in financial jeopardy, and the other unions need to join us in an effort to ensure NWA's viability," said Mark McClain, chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association at Northwest.

McClain warned that by the fourth quarter of 2005 or the first quarter of 2006 Northwest would face "devastating" losses that could bring on bankruptcy. The airline has lost some \$2.8 billion since 2001. The pilots union pressed its membership last November to give up \$265 million a year.

Bobby De Pace, president of the International Association of Machinists at Northwest, which represents baggage handlers and customer service agents, responded to the call by declaring, "I can understand what Mark is saying. There is an urgency. But we're not going to rush our process."

On May 20, the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal

Association (AMFA) revealed that Northwest is pushing to wipe out 2,840 jobs—cutting the workforce by more than half—and reduce wages by 25.7 percent. AMFA represented 9,300 workers at the end of 2001. That number has dwindled to the current level of 5,294.

Pennsylvania steelworkers strike over health care

Workers at Milton Steel in Milton, Pennsylvania went on strike last week after company negotiators refused to budge from their demand that workers for the first time must assume responsibility for a portion of health care premiums. The wage increase offered by Milton to its 99 workers will only cover increases for the first year.

Workers will now be required to ante up a co-pay, a \$250 deductible, and then cover 20 percent of the balance of costs. Milton previously paid all of these costs. Out-of-pocket costs for prescription drugs will increase as well. In the past, workers paid \$5 for a three-month supply of prescription drugs. These costs will now rise to anywhere from \$20 to \$110.

Canada

Electrical plant employees on strike

On May 16, 28 workers who make and repair electrical transformers at Cam Tran plant in Colborne, Ontario, about 130 km east of Toronto, went on strike. The workers, who are represented by Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), had rejected a company offer the previous Friday because it failed to address key issues such as a guarantee of reasonable wages and benefits, limits on mandatory overtime and fair vacation scheduling. According to CEP, "The employees are paid less than \$13 an hour on average and rely on additional incentives to make ends meet." In addition, the company has cut benefits.

The workers' previous contract expired on February 28.

Strike of Quebec's auto insurance workers

Nine hundred workers at Société de l'Assurance Automobile du Québec (SAAQ—the automobile insurance board of Quebec) walked out on May 18, canceling all car and motorcycle driving tests. SAAQ workers have been without a collective agreement for two years. The main issues in the dispute include subcontracting and job security. The workers are members of Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec.



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