

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 June 2005

## Latin America

### Autoworkers strike in Argentina

Autoworkers at three Buenos Aires plants walked off their jobs on June 8 and 9 to demand higher wages. The strike involved plants owned by Ford, DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen. At Ford, the walkout was an escalation of a two-week slowdown.

A week earlier in Cordoba, Argentina's main auto center, the Autoworkers union (SMATA) reached an agreement with a Volkswagen transmission plant. The agreement establishes a monthly base wage of 2,100 pesos (US\$724) plus an 1,800-peso bonus. As part of the agreement, SMATA promised one year of "social peace," effectively dividing the Cordoba workers from those in Buenos Aires.

### Government workers strike in Brazil

Workers employed by 30 government health and welfare agencies in Brazil went on a strike of indefinite duration June 2. The workers are demanding an 18 percent wage hike to compensate for a fall in real wages between 1995 and 2004. Union leaders said that promises made by the federal government throughout the decade were never kept.

The strike has affected every Brazilian state, though it is not as intense in the northern states of Acre, Amazonas and Roraima.

The Union of Health and Welfare Workers (SINSPREV) reports that in the greater São Paulo area, surrounding Brazil's largest city, 95 percent of the public health workers have joined the strike. In São Paulo state, the figure is 70 percent. São Paulo workers plan to send delegations to extend the strike throughout the state.

### Strikes continue in Panama

Negotiations are ongoing between the Martin Torrijos administration and strikers belonging to a coalition of unions representing construction and public sector workers. The striking teachers, health and government workers belong to a coalition of unions that oppose

legislation that would increase workers' contributions and retirement age in Panama's social security system. President Torrijos announced that the government would not insist on conditions for the negotiations. Admitting that the pension reforms are "painful," he insisted that his government acted to forestall the system's impending insolvency.

Negotiations began on the second week of the strike. Schools are shut down, building activity has been paralyzed and public hospitals are only open for emergency cases.

## United States

### Suburban San Diego janitors launch rolling strikes

Janitors in Carmel Valley, California, walked off the job June 7 at facilities owned by Peregrine Systems Inc. The strike comes one day after janitors at a dozen buildings in La Jolla struck for a day.

The strike movement involves about 1,400 janitors who work for eight companies in suburban San Diego. Workers are protesting the companies' latest contract proposal, which offers no benefits and seeks to roll back wages by one dollar to the 2003 level. The janitors, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), are currently paid a mere \$7.60 an hour. Their counterparts in downtown San Diego receive \$8.45 an hour, while those in Los Angeles receive \$9.33 to \$10.38 an hour.

### Washington, D.C., school bus drivers threatened with loss of full-time status

An administrator for the Washington, D.C., school district's special education transportation system announced last week that some 110 full-time Teamsters bus drivers who transport special education students must agree to become part-time drivers or forfeit their jobs. The move will slash wages for full-time special education drivers from \$20.00 an hour to \$15.81 and reportedly save the district \$2 million a year.

David Gilmore, the court-appointed administrator, is

taking advantage of the fact that there are already 1,300 part-time drivers in the system paid at the lower rate represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). He is attempting to portray the attack on full-time drivers as an issue of “unequal pay.” Speaking to the *Washington Post*, he said, “It doesn’t make any sense for one small group of employees to earn more money than their counterparts who do exactly the same work.”

The DC Council and the schools have been attacking Gilmore for overspending during the 2004-2005 school year by \$8 million. While school board officials welcomed the attack on workers, they rejected an earlier proposal by Gilmore to save \$28 million by purchasing buses as opposed to granting contracts to independent contractors.

### **Cab drivers at Florida airport protest rate increase**

More than 50 taxi cab drivers at Palm Beach International Airport in Florida halted the transport of passengers June 9 to protest Palm Beach Transportation’s decision to jack up the rate it charges the drivers to operate company-owned Yellow Cab taxis and luxury sedans. The transit company hiked the daily fee from \$105 to \$115, which drivers pay out of the fare they earn from customers while keeping the difference.

Drivers complain that they are already forced to work seven days a week and more than 12 hours a day in a struggle to survive. Moreover, the rate increase comes during the summer decline in airport traffic.

### **Pennsylvania education department sets deadline for striking teachers**

The Pennsylvania State Department of Education announced June 10 that striking teachers in the Old Forge school district near Scranton must go back to work by June 20 in order to complete the 180-day school year. At issue is the district’s insistence that teachers accept a contract that will reduce the scope of health insurance benefits. The union is demanding that the old plan be maintained.

Teachers struck Old Forge on June 9 as the school term headed into the last days of senior exams and graduation. It was the third strike in 15 months. Faculty members have been without a contract since 2003.

## **Canada**

### **Ontario Hydro workers strike**

More than 1,000 professional employees of Hydro One, Ontario’s power utility, went on strike June 6. The workers, represented by the Society of Energy Professionals, had already staged a one-day strike in May in an attempt to reach a fair contract with the employer, after rejecting two previous contract offers that demanded lower wages and benefits and a longer work week for new-hires. The union represents scientists, accountants, information technology specialists, auditors, engineers, electricity-system planners and supervisors. Their old contract expired on March 31.

### **National museum workers vote to strike**

Four hundred employees of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa voted June 6 by an 88 percent majority in favor of strike action. The main issue in the dispute with museum management is contracting out. Workers are represented by Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). New negotiations between the two sides are scheduled to start on June 16 and to last seven days. The executive vice-president of the National Capital Region of PSAC said that if an agreement is not reached, workers will go ahead with strike action.



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