

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 June 2005

Social Security strike continues in Panama

The strike against government attacks on social security rights in Panama is now in its fourth week. On June 16, Social Security employees along with striking workers and university students in Panama City fought off police armed with tear gas. Other protests took place in the cities of Colón and David. The strike involves teachers, construction workers and government employees.

At issue is government legislation to resolve a US\$3,700 million deficit in the Social Security system on the backs of the working class by adding three years to the age of retirement, raising payroll taxes from 7.5 to 9 percent for workers and employers, and increasing the number of necessary payments to retire.

President Martin Torrijos announced last week that the strike has already cost the country US\$100 million dollars.

Paraguayan teachers strike

A three-day strike by 45,000 teachers ended on June 17 when the government agreed to a wage increase. Teachers are to receive a 10 percent rise this November and 5 percent more next year. The increase is half of what was granted to Paraguayan public employees. The Paraguayan Educators Federation (FEP) and the National Educators Union (UNE) had also demanded that the government agree to a wage scale based on the number of years spent teaching.

Paraguay's fiscal budget is constrained by a 2003 agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The agreement, which includes the transfer of publicly owned industries to private ownership, will expire this year. On June 18, IMF negotiators met with government officials to negotiate a second agreement.

The government agreed to set aside 21,000 million guaranies (about US\$3.5 million) for the raises and 8,400 guaranies towards the seniority-based wage scale. Education Minister Blanca Ovelar indicated that no new money was involved, only a readjustment in the

existing education budget.

In return, both UNE and FEP signed a no-strike pledge through 2006.

Teachers and health workers protest in Argentine province

Teachers in the region surrounding Chilecito, the second largest city in the western province of La Rioja are in the second month of their strike over wages. Parents, many of whom are occupying Chilecito schools, support the teachers.

Also striking are public health workers and municipal employees. On June 1, thousands attended a rally in Chilecito to press their demands.

The demand in both strikes is for a wage increase of 250 pesos a month (about US\$90) and the abrogation of a government decree that automatically cuts workers' pay for each day they spend on the picket line. The strikers rejected a recent government offer of a 120 peso increase.

In the northern province of El Chaco, teachers and public employees have also been on strike for nearly a month, also over wages.

Teachers strike in Honduras

Some 56,000 teachers from all across Honduras walked off their jobs June 15 demanding higher wages.

Education Minister Roberto Martinez expressed surprise over the strike, insisting that school authorities are carrying out all agreements as funds permit. He urged the teachers to teach for 200 days in 2005.

So far this year, there have been 10 teachers' strikes in Honduras, all of them over wages. Monthly wages for elementary and secondary school teachers in that country begin at US\$300 and US\$400, respectively.

Protest strike by clerical workers hits University of California

Clerical workers at University of California campuses and facilities across the state walked out on strike last week to protest the failure of the school's administration to authorize pay raises. The Coalition of

University Employees (CUE), which represents 16,000 UC workers, voted by a 94 percent margin to strike.

CUE points out that \$20 million, originally earmarked for clerical wage increases, was diverted to other administration priorities. The workers' wages are 22 to 33 percent behind their counterparts in the clerical field.

Tentative contract in woodworkers' strike

The United Steelworkers Local 8183 and Interforest Corp. in Darlington, Pennsylvania, reached a tentative agreement last week in the one-month strike by 210 workers who make veneers used in furniture and paneling. Workers walked off the job May 8 after 13 months of bargaining that resulted in an insubstantial wage offer.

The new three-year agreement provides annual wage increases of 25 cents, 25 cents and 30 cents an hour. It also retains 100 percent health insurance coverage with the exception of a small deductible for senior workers. However, workers hired after May 2004 will be required to pick up 20 percent of health care costs.

Lockout follows protest strike at Hawaii hotel

The management at Turtle Bay Resort on Oahu, Hawaii's North Shore, locked out dozens of hotel workers June 18 following a one-day protest strike over the firing of a worker and the threat to fire another. Mark Seltman was fired June 16 for allegedly harassing another worker, something he denies.

Local 5, which represents Turtle Bay hotel workers, called the one-day strike to protect workers' right to free speech. Management then retaliated by locking out about 35 workers and replacing them with temporary hires. In May, workers walked off the job to protest unsafe working conditions. The union and hotel management are currently negotiating a new contract.

Quebec day care workers strike

Day care workers at 310 centers across the province staged a four-day strike closing the majority of facilities in Quebec in preparation for what their union says may turn into a general strike by the end of this month.

Last week, workers at the 380 government-run day care centers in the province voted to give their union a strike mandate, and according to their union, the Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN), they are determined to win their battle for higher wages against the provincial Liberal government. Parents have

reportedly been supportive of the day care workers, given that the government has made day care far more expensive and less accessible in recent years.

Toronto area garbage strike ends

A six-day strike by 212 garbage collectors in the Peel Region, north of Toronto, ended on June 20 after striking workers voted to accept the terms of a new four-year deal.

The new contract between the Teamsters union and Waste Management of Canada includes pay raises of 3 percent in the first three years and 3.5 percent in the final year as well as increases to pension funds. The company had hired scabs to continue some collection during the strike, which affected over a million residents of satellite cities north and west of Toronto.



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