

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 June 2005

Latin America

Brazilian government workers' strike to continue

Federal employees, on strike since June 2, voted on June 24 to continue their walkout. The workers are demanding a wage increase of 18 percent, while the government is only offering a 1 percent raise. The Confederation of Public Employees (CONDSEF) represents the strikers.

One-day strike by Peruvian transit workers and teachers

On June 23, public transit workers walked off their jobs in Peru. The one-day national strike was observed by about 50 percent of transit workers, according to a government official. Transit worker leader Jose Diaz León reported that the purpose of the strike by 80,000 transit employees was to protest excessive fines imposed on them by municipal authorities.

On the same day, thousands of teachers also carried out a 24-hour strike and marched through downtown Lima, where they rallied at the Legislative Palace. Officials of the United Education Workers Union (SUTEP) petitioned Congress for an increase in the education budget and for temporary hires to be made permanent.

University professors on strike in Argentina

Buenos Aires university instructors began a week-long protest last Friday with a march and rally to the Ministry of Education in Buenos Aires. The strike is set to conclude July 1. Throughout the week, the education workers plan to set up a tent at the Education Ministry and to conduct teach-ins to inform the public about their plight. The professors are demanding that bonuses and other informal remunerations be rolled into their base salaries. In some cases, those items represent 40 percent of a professor's income. In addition, they are demanding a raise and that pensions be set at 82 percent of wages.

Eighty-five percent of community college professors observed the strike on its first day. At the main universities in La Plata and Cordoba, not all departments joined in the protest.

University instructors are also considering not giving

exams and not beginning second-trimester classes if their demands are not addressed. Union officials described the last round of negotiations as "insulting" to their members, pointing out that many professors have not had an increase in their base pay since 1992.

The Ministry of Education claims to agree with the professors' demands, but that it is unable to grant them due to budget constraints.

Panamanian workers continue strike over Social Security

The National Front to Defend Social Security (FRENADESSO) declared on June 23 that the strike by teachers, health workers and construction workers against the reforms in the Social Security law will continue, given the refusal of the Torrijos government to cancel the measure.

FRENADESSO coordinator Andres Rodriguez declared that there has been no response from the government to several petitions from the strikers. Instead, he said, the government is carrying out negotiations with those that agree with it, excluding FRENADESSO. For that reason, the strike will continue, together with marches and rallies across the country.

On June 23, massive marches took place across Panama in repudiation of Social Security reforms that would raise the retirement age and increase employee contributions. The law was passed by Congress and took effect June 2.

The mass marches were a response to President Martin Torrijos's "National Dialogue" over the issue. Invited to the dialogue were businessmen, retirees and some unions that are not supporting the strike. FRENADESSO was not invited and has declared that it will not join the negotiations unless the Social Security reform is first suspended for 90 days.

On Friday, transit workers in Veraguas province joined the protest with a four-hour walkout. Transit union representatives said that they would escalate their job actions until the issue is resolved.

Protests in Uruguay

Uruguay's Central Labor Federation (PIT-CNT)

announced that on June 30, Montevideo workers will walk out for four hours and rally in the city center. This marks the first labor action against leftist President Tavarez Vazquez. On June 24, a march began in Punta del Este towards Montevideo, demanding the nationalization of the water and sewer systems, a measure that was approved as part of a constitutional reform last October. The march was set to reach Montevideo on June 27.

Also on June 24, President Vazquez visited the PIT-CNT offices accompanied by the ministers of labor, industry, housing and transportation. PIT-CUT leaders praised the move and declared that the march and strike were not directed against the Vazquez administration, but to assure the inclusion of union officials in Wage Committees that would impose uniform wage increases.

Next week's mobilization will demand an end to antiunion laws and a national monthly minimum wage of US\$120.

United States

Victimized worker charges BP with scapegoating in Texas oil refinery explosion

A 44-year-old operator at BP's oil refinery filed a slander suit in a state district court charging the oil giant with wrongfully trying to victimize him and five other workers for the March 23 explosion at the Texas City facility. "They were telling the world that we killed 15 people and injured 170," said Steve Adams, in reference to BP's May 17 press conference that palmed off blame on workers. "They are grabbing for stuff. They are just using us as scapegoats."

Adams says the company seized on the fact that he forgot to sign off on a procedure checklist at the end of the night shift preceding the accident. Adams blames the blast on BP's refusal to listen to workers' past complaints about dangerous working conditions. As an example, Adams wrote a letter in 1997 to the plant's previous owner, Amoco, about equipment that was "out of date for this day and age." More than two years later, after BP took over the refinery, it answered his complaint, saying, "The cost to implement this idea outweighs its potential benefits. Therefore, this idea is declined."

Thirteen years ago, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Amoco for outdated vent stacks—possibly the culprit in the recent explosion—and suggested measures to correct the danger. But the fine was dismissed. A little more than two years ago, BP began a project to finally implement OSHA's recommendations, but terminated it for budget reasons.

Staff workers strike Indiana treatment center

Workers at a Fort Wayne drug and alcohol treatment center walked off the job June 20 after the collapse of negotiations between negotiators for Washington House Treatment Center and Teamsters Local 414. The 17 workers—including counselors, technicians, maintenance and cooks—rejected demands to increase annual health care deductibles from zero to \$500 for individuals and up to \$1,000 for families. The out-of-pocket expenses could increase from \$1,000 to \$4,000 annually.

Other issues include the dropping of company-paid continuing education for counselors and the scrapping of a clause that permitted workers who worked at least 28 hours a week for four out of every six weeks to qualify for benefits. Workers make an average \$10 an hour.

Oregon creamery strike ends

Workers at the Tillamook County Creamery voted 150-48 to end their 11-day strike after management agreed to cover 13 percent more of workers' health care premiums. In return, workers will see their 9 percent pay increases, which run through 2008, cut back to 7.6 percent.

The rejected contract called for a cap on what the company would pay toward future increases in premiums. The new agreement puts caps on increases for premiums of \$40 a month in the second year of the contract and \$32 a month in the third year. Workers will pay 5 percent of future premium increases above these initial levels.



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