

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 July 2005

Latin America

Four-hour protest strike in Uruguay

Uruguay's union federation (PIT-CNT) carried out its first national strike since the election of the leftist government of President Tavaré Vázquez. The protest lasted four hours, during which several thousand strikers marched from downtown Montevideo and rallied at the nation's stock exchange.

"This mobilization is not directed against the government," declared a representative of the PIT-CNT bureaucracy. "Its purpose is to defend democracy and workers' involvement." The PIT-CNT helped bring President Vázquez's so-called Broad Front to power four months ago.

Among the PIT-CNT demands are greater union participation in wage councils (that include government, business and labor representatives). The strike had less of an impact in cities outside Montevideo. At the rally, workers held up signs demanding wage increases and jobs.

Also on June 30, Uruguayan teachers and health workers struck for 24 hours. Both groups of workers have rejected a 2.5 percent wage increase. The PIT-CIT has called for a national monthly minimum wage of US\$120.

Forty-eight hour strike by Buenos Aires meatpackers

Meatpackers in Argentina rejected management's wage proposal for a monthly minimum wage of 800 pesos and walked out for 48 hours on July 1, demanding a minimum of 1,100 pesos (US\$400) plus eight pesos per hour for laborers.

The Buenos Aires Meat and Derivatives Workers Union (SIGBA) has accused management of stalling negotiations, and renegeing on previous understandings over wages.

On the day previous to the strike, workers marched and rallied at the plants of CADIF and ABC, the main beef exporters. The strike was set to continue through July 4.

"March for life" exposes child poverty

The March for Life, organized by the National Movement of the Country Children, ended in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo on July 1. The 4,500-kilometer march, protesting the living conditions of children, began with 200 children and 100 teachers in the Northwestern city of Tucumán on June 20. Hundreds of protesters marched through eight Argentine provinces, visiting 10 major cities, before arriving in Buenos Aires.

The mobilization and protest was assisted by the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), UNICEF, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Argentine Teachers Union. The march was organized around the slogan "hunger is a crime." Protesters demanded an end to malnutrition and hunger, the expansion of public education and an end to child labor.

The rally also demanded that the government of President Nestor Kirchner create a "universal insurance fund" that would guarantee 200 pesos a month (about US\$70) to every child in Argentina under the

age of 12.

The protest organizers indicated that while Argentina, a country of 33 million, produces an agricultural bounty that feeds 300 million across the world, millions of its citizens go hungry every day. "Some 100 children each day die from poverty; those that survive end up with the permanent physical and emotional scars that come from growing up poor," said a spokesperson for the march.

Workers protest Argentina's moves to privatize Rio Santiago shipyard

Hundreds of Rio Santiago workers rallied in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo to denounce a plan, approved by Argentina's legislature, to place 49 percent of the Rio Santiago shipyard in private hands. Under the proposal, the government would absorb the facility's substantial bank debts. President Nestor Kirchner had previously promised to prevent the shipyard from being privatized.

Shipyard workers point out that the decision to privatize was announced in the wake of a visit to the country by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

On June 7, the Kirchner administration announced an agreement with the Venezuelan government to build and repair eight Venezuelan vessels at the facility. Located south of Buenos Aires, the shipyard currently employs 2,000 workers.

Rio Santiago workers have a history of militancy. The shipyard was militarized during the dictatorship of 1976-1982, when scores of workers were kidnapped and killed by government forces. During the 1980s, the workers successfully resisted plans to close or privatize Rio Santiago.

United States

Minnesota budget impasse idles 9,000 state workers

The Minnesota legislature adjourned its special session July 2 without a budget agreement, thereby ensuring the partial shutdown of state government and the idling of 9,000 workers through the Fourth of July holiday. The unfunded parts of the budget hit kindergarten through twelfth grade education, the Department of Human Services and the Transportation Department.

Some 4,000 workers hit with furloughs were concentrated in transportation. Many workers will use vacations to get them through the immediate period ahead, but there are already 500 state workers without vacation time and that figure is to grow by 250 workers each day. When July 15 arrives, the state will be required to lay off workers.

Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty, the Republican-controlled House and Democratic-controlled Senate have been debating throughout a five-month regular session and a one-month special session to come to an agreement on a \$30 billion budget. They went into the session with a \$466 million deficit and, according to Democratic Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson, were \$200 million apart heading into the weekend holiday. Behind the impasse, sections of business are wrangling over the allocation of money to their

specific interests and a considerable section hopes to use the shutdown to outright destroy jobs and services, as evidenced by the designation of many workers and services as “nonessential.”

In 2001, Independent Governor Jesse Ventura spearheaded a provocative attack on a strike by 23,000 state workers, calling in the National Guard to carry out strikebreaking activities. During the strike, and later in a 2004 strike by transit workers in Minneapolis and St. Paul, sections of business who see no profit in the various state enterprises argued the loss of service was unnoticeable. They have continued this drumbeat into the present stalemate.

Arizona copper miners strike widens

Three hundred more copper miners for Asarco Corporation walked out July 2, one day after 700 of the companies’ workers struck nearby mines some 60 miles north of Tucson, Arizona. According to District 12 supervisor for the United Steelworkers, “This is not a strike about Asarco’s proposals, because we never even got to any kind of offer on a contract. This is a strike about their tactics at the bargaining table.”

Nevertheless, Asarco has issued demands for a three-year wage freeze and cuts in medical and pension benefits. Asarco CEO Daniel Tellechea insists a concessions contract is necessary to keep Asarco’s parent company, Mexico City-based Grupo Mexico, competitive with other copper producers. Copper prices are at a 16-year high and climbing. Grupo Mexico’s first-quarter profits were US\$2.05 million. One year ago, the company registered first-quarter profits of US\$16.4 million. Grupo Mexico also owns operations in Sonora, Mexico and Southern Peru Copper.

The last copper strike in Arizona was at the Asarco mines in 1990. The region was convulsed at the beginning of the 1980s by a strike at the Clifton-Morenci area’s copper mines owned by Phelps Dodge. The strike was isolated by the United Steelworkers while Arizona Democratic Governor Bruce Babbitt dispatched National Guard troops to militarily break the strike. Phelps Dodge continues to operate as a nonunion mine.

New York Airport workers strike over health-care costs

Workers who refuel airplanes at Kennedy International Airport went on strike against Allied Aviation Services July 1 to oppose a new contract that will require them to pay for health-care benefits for the first time. The 300 members of Teamsters Local 553 would be required to pay 4 percent of their salaries towards health-care premiums in the first year of the proposed contract, 8 percent in the second and 15 percent in the third year.

Allied is only offering a 2 percent raise, which would not counteract the effects of increased health-care costs for workers. According to the Teamsters, the airport refuelers have only received the equivalent of a \$1-an-hour raise in the past 11 years. Allied Aviation has brought in 130 management workers from other operations in Texas, California, Missouri and New Jersey to serve as strikebreakers.

Casting and machine workers strike Alabama plant

Contract talks broke off last week at the Citation Corporation casting and machining plant in Brewton, Alabama, with no sign of an agreement in the strike that began on June 11. The 162 members of the Glass Molders and Pottery International Union (GMP) voted unanimously to strike Citation after company negotiators refused to provide a raise, a 401(k) plan or pay overtime.

Workers previously struck Citation for three days in 2002. The company, which just emerged from bankruptcy, has 5,000 employees with operations in seven states, Canada and Germany.

Plumbers end strike at Kent State University

Plumbers and Fitters voted June 25 to end their two-week strike on

the Kent State University campus in Ohio and returned to work two days later. Jim Swenberg, chairman of Plumbers and Fitters Union Local 219, declined to make public the contents of the new agreement.

According to other workers, the strike resulted from unfair hiring practices. The walkout brought construction on two campus projects to a halt. One of the projects was the renovation of the Chilled Water Plant that provides air conditioning to a number of campus buildings. Temperatures in classrooms reached 93 degrees and Kent State employees were sent home early with pay.

Canada

Toronto outside workers poised to strike

Six thousand outside workers employed by the city of Toronto voted 85 percent in favor of strike mandate on June 29. The workers, members of Toronto Civic Employees Union Local 416, affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), will be in a legal strike position on July 8. Local 416 bargains on behalf of water/wastewater workers, paramedics (EMS), solid waste workers, parks and recreation workers, corporate services and transportation workers.

The last contract for outside workers expired at the end of 2004 and new agreements have already been reached with Parking Authority and energy services. Toronto Public Library workers, members of the same union, could join the outside workers on July 14. Over 50 percent of them are part-time workers with little or no benefits and the Library Board has been shifting work to the lowest paid workers in the system. According to the local 416 president, outstanding issues include wages, union security, layoff and recall, job content, service and seniority, hours of work and pensions. Toronto municipal workers’ last strike was in 2002 and lasted 16 days.

Montreal Symphony cancels season due to strike

The ongoing strike of Montreal Symphony Orchestra musicians has forced management to cancel the remainder of the summer season. In all, 13 concerts have been canceled, including the Mozart Plus Festival, which was scheduled for the month of July, three Loto-Québec Concerts in the Parks and the Orford Festival on June 30.

The musicians went on strike May 9 to protest a schedule that required them to work more consecutive days than permitted by Canadian labor laws. In addition, they are fighting an extension to a two-year pay freeze that went into effect in 2002. Management is only offering a salary increase of 0.9 percent for the subsequent two years. The musicians are represented by the Montreal Musicians Guild, a unit of the American Federation of Musicians.

BC health-care workers vote to strike

About 1,100 privatized British Columbia health-care workers, employees of food and facilities management company Sodexo, voted on June 27 to strike by a margin of 96 percent. The workers, who include food service, cleaning staff and support workers, are employed at hospitals and nursing homes in the Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley, Victoria and the Sunshine Coast. The issue is wages—the workers are making \$10.15 an hour and their union, Hospital Workers’ Union (HEU), is seeking a raise of about \$2.50 an hour.



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