

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 July 2005

Latin America

Government employees strike in Brazil

Government workers across Brazil were set to vote at union meetings July 9 on whether or not to continue their 37-day-old strike. A spokesperson for the National Confederation of Federal Public Servants (CONDSEF) indicated that the strike would most likely continue because workers consider the proposed compromise insufficient.

At issue is the strikers' demand that wage increases granted to employees of the National Social Security Institute (INSS) be extended to all federal employees. INSS workers received an 18 percent wage increase, on top of a 47 percent readjustment of health, welfare and other social security benefits. CONDSEF represents 600,000 federal employees, over 70 percent of whom are on strike. In addition, more than 28 percent of INSS workers are not crossing the picket lines.

The latest government proposal contained a benefit readjustment stretching over a period of six years and a lower wage increase. Strikers are expected to reject the offer.

Mexican miners campaigning for higher benefits to farmers

Leaders of the Mexican Miners Union and the National Farmers Confederation (CNC) reached an agreement last week to unite the economic struggles of both sectors. A task force representing the leaders of both organizations is demanding that draft labor legislation being discussed in congress include benefits to 4 million agricultural workers.

In addition, they said they will fight any attempt to weaken the right to form unions, to negotiate contracts, to strike or to violate the human rights of workers.

The task force announced that it would oppose government attempts to tax workers' social security benefits. Miners' leaders also said they would press for legislation protecting farmers whose lands are confiscated for mining concessions; currently, many of them are poorly compensated.

Natural gas employees on strike in Argentina

Argentine Labor Ministry officials are intervening to end a strike of natural gas workers, claiming that the strike is creating shortages during a cold wave in central Argentina. A spokesperson for the gas producer Repsol-YPF said the strike affects mainly consumers of bottled gases, and would not affect exports to Chile.

However, union sources reported that all facets of gas extraction and production have been paralyzed by the strike, affecting bottled gas as well as the gas delivered through the region's pipelines. The 5,000 members of the Federation of Private Oil and Gas Unions (FASPYGP) have shut down wells and plants in Neuquen, Rosario, Cordoba, Buenos Aires and Santa Fe.

The gas workers are demanding an increase from 550 pesos (US\$160-\$190) to 850 pesos (US\$250-\$300). The walkout began July 4.

Copper miners strike in Chile

Miners at the Zaldivar Mine in northern Chile walked off their jobs on July 4. Management at the mine, which is owned by the Canadian conglomerate Placer Dome, originally planned to continue producing 340 tons of ore per day for the duration of the strike, but it has only been able to produce 120 tons, about a fifth of its normal capacity.

The strikers are demanding wage increases that range from 6 to 10 percent, depending the job category, twice management's offer. As a result of the strike, world copper prices climbed last week. Chile produces one third of the world's copper.

Pilots' strike forces Argentine Airline to cancel domestic flights

A two-day strike by pilots took place in Argentina on July 7 and 8 against Austral Airlines. Austral is the domestic arm of Argentine Airlines, which is owned by a Spanish conglomerate.

The pilots, members of the Airline Pilots Association (APLA), are demanding a 40 percent wage increase and the rehiring of 30 fired pilots.

The strike is part of a strike wave across this South

American nation, which coincides with an unusually heavy tourist season, as travelers seek to take advantage of low prices as a consequence of Argentina's undervalued currency. In addition to the Austral strike, employees of another domestic airline, Southern Winds, are also on strike over nonpayment of back wages. About 14,000 passengers were left stranded in Buenos Aires' Jorge Newberry airport.

United States

Janitors for California aerospace companies launch rolling strikes

Contract janitors for Boeing Co., Northrop Grumman Corp. and Raytheon Co. launched rolling strikes July 6 after contract talks between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and cleaning contractors ended in an impasse.

About 700 janitors are involved in the contract dispute at locations in El Segundo, Redondo Beach and Long Beach, California. Janitors currently earn \$8 an hour and take home about \$1,000 a month, but have no health care. Negotiators for the cleaning contractors—Servicon Systems, Somers Building and Maintenance, and Aramark—are proposing wage increases of 40 cents in the first year and 25 cents in 2006. They have offered to add some individual health coverage in the third year.

According to the SEIU, workers backed a strike after cleaning contractors "threatened, harassed and fired workers to keep them quiet about poverty conditions."

Chicago pharmacists strike Walgreens drugstores

Some 1,200 pharmacists at 400 Chicago-area Walgreen Co. stores walked off the job July 7 to protest low staffing levels and increased workloads that they believe could endanger the safety of customer-patients. According to the National Pharmacists Association—the union representing the strikers—the strike had wide support, although about 120 pharmacists crossed picket lines. Walgreens has cut pharmacy hours and is bringing in pharmacists from Walgreens stores throughout the state of Illinois in an attempt to break the strike.

Walgreens' last contract proposal called for a 20 percent pay increase along with a benefits package for a 40-hour workweek. Walgreens, the nation's largest drugstore chain in terms of sales, employs 16,000 pharmacists at 4,800 stores in 45 states. San Francisco is the only other region outside Chicago where Walgreens has a unionized pharmacist workforce.

San Francisco city workers overcharged for health care coverage

An audit by San Francisco's city controller revealed

that more than 100,000 city and school workers, retirees and children were overcharged for health care and blamed the Health Service Board's management for failure to properly oversee health care providers. The Health Service System has accumulated a \$41 million surplus that considerably outstripped costs and medical claims.

During 2004-2005, employees on the Kaiser Health Foundation plan overpaid by an estimated \$21 a month per employee. For those covered under Blue Cross, the overcharge was \$24 a month.

Canada

Montreal hotel workers stage one-day protest

Thirty-six hundred hotel workers in Montreal and nearby Laval held a 24-hour walkout on July 8, fighting for better working conditions. Issues in the dispute include subcontracting, retirement, insurance, vacation time, salaries and commissions, arbitration and sick leave. The employees at 17 hotels are represented by Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN). Initially, 18 hotels were set to be struck, but early that day CSN was able to reach a tentative deal with the Sheraton Centre. The next day, they also reached a deal with Laval Hilton that included pay increases of 3 percent in the first year and 4 percent in the second and third years.

Hotel workers are currently paid between \$9 and \$15 (Canadian) an hour and their union is demanding an 8 percent increase over three years. Unless a deal is reached, the union is planning a strike later this month.

Toronto Public Library workers vote to strike

On July 8, workers employed by the Toronto Public Library voted 79 percent in favor of a strike if a deal with the library board cannot be reached by July 14. The 2,400 library workers are members of the Toronto Civic Employees' Union, Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). They are protesting working conditions that have meant, according to a member of the Local 416 negotiating committee, "over 50 percent of the library workforce is now part-time, with little or no benefits."

A strike would end all library services, including children's summer programs, public access to computer terminals, and home delivery programs for seniors.



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