

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 July 2005

Latin America

Brutal repression against unemployed Argentine workers

According to a report from the Argenpress news agency, provincial and federal police squads entered a plant on July 20 belonging to the Repsol-YPF oil company in Santa Cruz province and savagely threw out 50 unemployed youth who were occupying the facility.

The police assault took place near the city of Caleta Olivia in northern Santa Cruz. The youth had occupied the plant a few days earlier demanding decent jobs. Provincial authorities had responded by offering temporary subsidies, which the youth rejected.

The protest began July 12 when the young workers marched into the plant and set up tents on the factory's grounds.

On the evening of July 20, 500 police began the assault with volleys of teargas and rubber bullets. They then beat the youth that had occupied the plant with nightsticks.

The brutal beatings continued at the city jail. When family members of the youth arrived and saw what was going on they began protesting, at which point the police turned on them as well.

Public health strike in Argentina

Health workers launched a new round of strikes in response to Buenos Aires provincial authorities' refusal to address their wage and benefit demands.

Public health workers will strike 70 hospitals two days a week. The non-medical employees are demanding a base monthly wage of 1,800 pesos (about US\$600), a signing bonus of 600 pesos and a 2 percent seniority raise.

Mexican Social Security employees declare themselves in "rebellion"

Tens of thousands of employees of Latin America's largest Social Security Institute (ISS) (which in Mexico includes health insurance) marched along Mexico's

central Paseo de la Reforma Boulevard and rallied at the Mexican Government Palace on July 20.

At the rally, leaders of the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) declared that the workers were now "in rebellion" against the anti-union policies of the agency's management. Recently, ISS director Santiago Levy cancelled the hiring of new specialists, putting at risk the health of pregnant women, the elderly and children across Mexico. The SNTSS has previously warned that the government of Vicente Fox intends to dismantle the ISS.

Wednesday's mobilization brought together SNTSS members from across Mexico. Many of the signs demanded Levy's resignation. Other signs demanded a complete account of how many had already died from the lack of personnel, medicine and equipment. Throughout the march, which stretched several miles from the historic Angel of Independence Monument to the Zocalo Square, protesters chanted "We demand that they give us tools to work with."

According to the Mexican Daily *La Jornada*, following passage of so-called Social Security reform legislation in 2004, a hiring freeze was imposed that so far has eliminated 17,000 jobs. In addition, there has been a decline in the purchase of needed equipment.

The newspaper points out that the ISS has not fully spent its budget despite the existence of a public health crisis in many parts of Mexico.

United States

California farm workers rally before contract talks

Some 1,500 farm workers and their supporters marched in San Francisco July 17, as negotiations between E & J Gallo and the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) got under way last week. The UFW is launching a boycott of Gallo's grapes and wine products to call attention to the fact that the grower underpays its workers in comparison to other companies in Sonoma County.

According to the UFW, most workers in Sonoma make between \$9 and \$10 an hour, while Gallo only pays its 221 workers \$8.38.

The previous week, a 42-year-old farm worker died on a farm near Bakersfield, California, while working in 105-degree heat. The UFW has called on California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to mandate shade areas and hourly breaks for farm workers.

Sympathy strikes support Texas janitors

Striking janitors who clean Houston, Texas, office buildings for the cleaning contractor ABM sent pickets to Washington, DC, New York City and Sacramento, California, to win support for their struggle to equalize pay in Houston with workers at other ABM locations.

In all, janitor-members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in more than 30 cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco, went on sympathy strike to support the Houston janitors. ABM pays Houston janitors a mere \$5.25 an hour and no benefits, while ABM janitors in other cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago make between \$10 and \$20.

About 25 janitors at First City Tower in downtown Houston launched the first of a series of rolling strikes to complain of harassment and spying by ABM over workers' involvement in union affairs.

The SEIU filed an unfair labor practices complaint against ABM for retaliating against Delmy Varela for her union activities. ABM ordered the woman to collect garbage from every office on all 17 floors of the First City Tower in addition to her normal duties of cleaning kitchens, floors and conference rooms.

Canada

British Columbia steelworkers strike

More than 1,300 production, technical and clerical workers at Teck Cominco, a metals producer in Trail, British Columbia, went on strike July 19 after mediation talks broke off. The main issue in the dispute is wages. According to the steelworkers' union, bargaining agent for the strikers, the company is "rolling in cash and profits," while the workers haven't received a fair and equitable portion of the profit. Last April, Teck Cominco announced that its profits had more than doubled compared to the same quarter a year earlier due to higher commodity prices for the metals it mines.

Nova Scotia home support workers vote to strike

On July 19, more than 1,000 home support workers, employed by Tri-County Victoria Order of Nurses (VON), voted 89 percent in favor of strike if their union, Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NUPGE), cannot win a fair contract. According to NUPGE, home support workers across the province earn about C\$12 per hour and are not guaranteed their working hours. Employees also complain that they are required to use their own vehicles for work with only minimum compensation. The union is demanding a pay raise to above C\$15 per hour.

Telus workers walk out

More than half of the workforce of 25,000 at telecommunications company Telus in Alberta and British Columbia went on strike July 21 after four-and-a-half years of negotiations failed to produce a first contract. The strike came one day before the company imposed a contract that the union had rejected.

The main issue is job security. Telus recently opened a call center in the Philippines, and the company has insisted that it needs flexibility in order to compete in the telecommunications market. Conflict between the two sides has been increasingly bitter in the last few months. On the first day of the strike, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) ruled for the third time in two years that Telus has interfered with the Telecommunication Workers Union's (TWU's) representation rights and failed to bargain in good faith. These rulings, however, failed to include any measures to remedy the situation.



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