

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 September 2005

## Latin America

### Argentine demonstration commemorates victims of dictatorship

Tens of thousands of students, teachers and unemployed workers marched in Buenos Aires and rallied at the Plaza de Mayo, across from Argentina's government house, on September 16 to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the "night of the pencils." At dawn on September 16, 1976, seven high school students (ages 16, 17 and 18) involved in the campaign for free bus passes for students were kidnapped by government security forces in the city of La Plata. The night of the pencils initiated a wave of repression against high school students that claimed hundreds of victims. Only one of the seven kidnapped students survived the dictatorship.

The marchers petitioned the government of Nestor Kirchner to invest the current budget surplus of US\$20,000 million in health and education. Many signs demanded that the education budget be tripled and denounced legislation that facilitates corporate interference in education.

The marchers included delegations of high school students from across Argentina. Students interviewed by *Página 12*, a Buenos Aires daily, indicated that they had been inspired by the memory of the struggle of high school students in the 1970s. "They struggled for a just country that they thought possible then and that today many of us see as more difficult. We identify with them," said Mariela Newman, a Buenos Aires high school student.

Striking workers from the Garrahan Pediatric Hospital, transit workers, meatpacking workers and teachers, all dressed in their work uniforms, marched alongside the students. Parents of their young patients accompanied the Garrahan strikers. The largest labor contingent consisted of unemployed workers. A press release issued by representatives of the marchers indicated that social inequality is on the rise, with 18 million living in poverty, 4 million unemployed, 4 million retirees without pensions and 4 million jobless youth that cannot afford to study. The document accused the government of doctoring the unemployment statistics and of refusing calls for a job-creation program to build homes for the homeless.

Similar marches and rallies took place across Argentina, including a rally at the Navy Mechanics School, a notorious clandestine prison and torture center during the 1970s. Victoria Donda Perez, who was born in the facility from a disappeared mother, addressed the protesters, calling on them to emulate the disappeared students in a struggle for justice and equality.

### Argentine health workers strike

Employees at Argentine public health and private hospitals, clinics, sanatoriums and emergency services carried out a 24-hour

strike on September 15 to press their demand for better wages and job security. The health unions are calling for negotiations for a master contract that, alongside higher wages, would include a higher budget for public health care, as well as subsidies for private hospitals and job security.

A spokesperson for the health workers declared that the strikers objected to the practice of paying workers under the table, or with bonuses that are not rolled into base pay. The health workers declared September 15 a National Day for Health Care. The strike was most effective in Buenos Aires, where employees at all 77 of the city's hospitals participated in the protest. Also participating were health workers in the provinces of Salta, Santa Fé, Córdoba, Neuquén, Corrientes and La Rioja.

Argentine health minister Ginés Gonzales García recently condemned striking health workers at Buenos Aires's prestigious Garrahan Pediatric Hospital as "sanitary terrorists."

### Strike wave in Peru

Last week, there was an explosion of strike activity in Peru. Struggles by health workers, teachers, dockworkers and farm workers all resulted in walkouts. All of these struggles involve wage demands, with the exception of a dockworkers' protest strike last Wednesday against the privatization of the nation's ports.

Striking construction workers rallied in Lima and barricaded the Pan-American Highway, blocking the movement of passenger vehicles and trucks.

A 35-day strike by 20,000 Peruvian public health nurses continues to expand. The government of Alejandro Toledo has given them 48 hours to return to work or be replaced. The nurses, employed by the Health ministry, are demanding wage parity with Social Security hospital nurses plus the hiring of an additional 4,500 nurses. Public health nurses earn between US\$212 and US\$272 per month in wages plus bonuses and incentives of between US\$45 and US\$200 for night shifts and other tasks.

At the root of these conflicts is the government's determination to maintain what it calls "fiscal discipline" in its budget, a code word for the privatization of state enterprises and austerity measures that affect education and health care.

The recent appointment of Pablo Kuczynski as prime minister, a proponent of privatizations, elicited protests in Lima. Kuczynski has now presented a draft budget for 2006 that represents the continuation of austerity policies, including cuts in health and education and the freezing of public-sector wages. Draft legislation backed by Kuczynski grants tax and subsidy giveaways to big business. Twenty-six percent of the budget (10,946 million soles) is destined to servicing Peru's external debt, a figure that rivals the amount budgeted for education and health

combined (12,771 million soles). The budget makes illegal any wage increase for public employees and puts stringent limits on hiring of new workers.

At the same time, through a combination of corruption and corporate tax giveaways, the tax burden in Peru falls squarely on the working and middle classes.

#### **General Motors announces job cuts in Brazil**

General Motors plans to sack 600 workers out of the 10,500 workers employed at its São Paulo plant.

Carlos Prates, president of the Brazilian metal workers' local at GM, made the announcement last week. According to Prates, the layoff is the result of a 15 percent depreciation of the US dollar relative to the Brazilian real. Prates indicated that the metalworkers' union would not oppose a GM program of voluntary resignations to eliminate the jobs, as long as it was truly voluntary.

If GM were to "force" workers to resign, Prates indicated that the union is prepared to strike the GM plant.

Currently, the plant produces 17,000 cars per month. GM management issued no statement.

#### **United States**

##### **Health care workers strike San Francisco hospital**

About 800 health care workers at California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC) in San Francisco walked off the job September 13 after hospital management refused to accept a federal mediator's proposal. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 250 originally had targeted seven additional hospitals besides CPMC for strike action but called off the other strikes. All the medical centers are operated by the non-profit Sutter Health.

The mediator's proposal called for the setting up of a training and career upgrade fund for workers with tuition reimbursement, paid time for shop stewards and the right to organize a union without management interference. In return, the SEIU dropped its demand for a master agreement covering Sutter's facilities.

The SEIU's contract with CPMC expired in November of last year. It represents dietary workers, respiratory therapists, housekeepers and clerical workers at CPMC's three campuses in San Francisco, which employ a total of 5,500 health-care workers.

##### **Illinois teachers voting on offer**

The 86 teachers and staff workers for Farmington, Illinois, School District 265 were voting over the weekend whether to accept the latest negotiated offer coming after one week on strike. The District 265 negotiators offered a three-year agreement with 3 percent annual wage increases. This proposal replaces the previous offer of a four-year contract with raises ranging from 1.12 percent to 3.78 percent.

The school board refused to revise upwards its 6 percent retirement incentive raise over two years. District 265 negotiators came to the bargaining table looking to limit teachers' pay increases because of an \$850,000 deficit from the previous year. The school board cancelled classes starting September 12 due to the strike.

##### **Strike continues at West Virginia industrial plant**

Workers at PPG Industries in New Martinsville, West Virginia, continued their strike last week against attempts by management to push through a two-tier system that would pay new hires

substantially lower wages. Nearly 500 members of the International Chemical Workers Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union voted against the concessions contract September 9.

No new negotiations have taken place. PPG Industries was founded in 1883 as the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. Today, it operates 108 manufacturing facilities and affiliates in 23 countries around the world.

#### **Canada**

##### **Vancouver hospital workers walk out**

Eleven hundred hospital support workers represented by the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) went on strike September 15 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The workers are employed by the French company Sodexho and work in several hospitals and nursing homes that have contracted out services to Sodexho. They are demanding a wage increase that would raise their salaries from C\$10.15 an hour to C\$14.90 an hour over four years, while the company is offering only a 10 percent increase over three years. The workers are employed in food service, housekeeping and other service-related jobs.

##### **Ontario steelworkers locked out after rejecting contract**

On September 15, workers at the Ivaco steelmaking facility in Hawkesbury, Ontario, owned by Heico Companies LLC, voted 90 percent to reject the employer's offer. The 450 workers are members of United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Locals 8794 and 7940. Heico, which acquired Ivaco in December 2004, is demanding unrestrained contracting out and a different pension plan for new employees, which will result in two-tiered pensions. It has also threatened to close parts of the operation and offered no wage increases, according to United Steelworkers Ontario/Atlantic Director Wayne Fraser.

The company responded to the rejection vote by locking workers out.



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