

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 October 2005

Latin America

March for truth and justice in Uruguay

The Uruguayan labor federation (PIT-CNT) led a march in downtown Montevideo on September 30 demanding full accountability for the crimes of 11 years of military dictatorship (1973-1984). During that period the Uruguayan military viewed itself as an occupying force over the entire civilian population (every citizen in Uruguay was classified as an A, B, or C category, indicating that person's political stance.) Hundreds were kidnapped, with many dying under torture.

PIT-CNT leader Juan Castillo said the purpose of Friday's mobilization was to pressure President Tabaré Vázquez to uncover the truth of the repression: "We demand that, once and for all, Uruguayans know the truth and that justice be done, with no further delays."

Participating in the demonstration, in addition to the PIT-CNT, were Amnesty International, the Commission of Family Members of the Disappeared (FEDECAM-URUGUAY) and the Service for Peace and Justice (SERPAD).

Mexican sugar workers protest against production law

On September 28, thousands of Mexican sugar workers declared themselves on strike to protest a new federal sugar production law. Major job actions took place in the states of Veracruz, San Luis de Potosi and Jalisco. Veracruz is the center of Mexico's sugar industry, responsible for 35 percent of sugar output. Twenty-two mills operate there. Most of the nation's 58 mills were affected by the strike, including the 27 owned by the government.

The strike was sparked by an appeal by the administration of President Vicente Fox to the Supreme Court against a recently approved law on sugar production protecting cane prices. The walkout is part of a series of job actions designed to pressure Fox into withdrawing the complaint and to press for an end to a budget freeze that blocks expanding the labor force and improving the machinery at the state-owned mills.

Public health strike in the Dominican Republic

Waldo Ariel Suero, president of the union that represents public health doctors, the Dominican Doctors College (CMD), declared last Thursday that all 173 public hospitals would be affected by a strike this week. Ariel Suero declared

that direct negotiations between CMD leaders, public health officials and president Leonel Fernandez continue to be at an impasse. "Nobody can stop this strike," said Ariel Suero, "the biggest obstacle is Fernandez himself. He refuses to address our grievances." For his part, Fernandez asked his compatriots to pray to God for a solution to the crisis that has enveloped this Caribbean nation as a consequence of skyrocketing fuel prices.

Volkswagen workers strike in Brazil

Workers at the Volkswagen plant in the Sao Bernardo do Campo in Sao Paulo state walked out last Thursday following an afternoon assembly. The strike of indefinite duration is over wages and profit sharing. At the assembly workers rejected a 4,700 reales (US\$2,500) profit-sharing bonus from management.

The Sao Bernardo facility is Volkswagen's largest assembly plant and employs 12,000 workers.

Argentina's Garrahan hospital workers walk out again

Nurses at the Garrahan pediatric hospital in Buenos Aires carried out a 24-hour strike last Friday after turning down a government offer of a 20 percent raise. Three of four unions at the hospital accepted the government offer; the new wage scale will go into effect on October 1.

The fourth union, the Association of Government Employees (ATE), rejected the wage offer. Since the beginning of the year, ATE members have been on strike for combined total of 32 days. ATE is demanding a basic monthly wage of 1,800 pesos (about US\$600) and professional recognition for the nurses at the hospital.

The day before the strike, the Garrahan workers rallied at the Labor Ministry. ATE leaders point out that a 20 percent wage increase favors highly paid management employees, who would get a 1,200 peso increase. At the other end of the ladder, orderlies would only receive 140 pesos, increasing the wage gap between the highest and lowest paid workers.

Instead the union is demanding that everyone receive the same wage increase, 550 pesos. Health Ministry officials reject the ATE demand and consider the matter closed, charging that the ATE bureaucracy is politically motivated.

United States

Steelworkers end strike after company announces hiring of replacements

The United Steelworkers Union ended a five-week walkout at Giant Cement Holding, Inc. in Harelyville, South Carolina after the company announced it would begin hiring replacement workers. The 138 strikers began returning to their jobs September 26. However, Giant Cement is not admitting all workers back to their original jobs, claiming some have already been replaced.

The return to work means union members will suffer the loss of retirement and insurance benefits. The Steelworkers union had no comment on the ending of the strike. A Giant Cement company spokesperson said the union had agreed to an unconditional return to work. Giant's parent company, Cementos Portland Valderrivas of Spain, is currently renovating the Harleyville cement plant at a cost of nearly \$120 million.

Health-care workers arrested in protest at California hospital

Hundreds of health-care workers at California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC) in San Francisco held a protest on hospital property September 28 to pressure management to accept a mediator's proposal to end the two-week-old strike by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). After a police order was issued to disperse, 20 union members remained behind to be arrested.

The SEIU, which represents 800 health-care workers at CPMC, struck the facility on September 13. Originally, the union had targeted an additional seven hospitals—all operated by Sutter Health—for joint strike action, but later reduced the target to CPMC alone. Among the concessions by the union in the mediator's proposal is dropping of the demand for a master agreement covering all of Sutter's facilities.

Striking California bus drivers refuse city's appeal for return to work

Striking bus drivers refused an appeal by the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District to return to work while the agency considers the most recent proposal by the United Transportation Union (UTU) Local 23. The latest job action by transit drivers resulted from the transit board's refusal on September 23 to ratify a tentative agreement. Workers responded by walking out on September 27.

Meanwhile, the Transit District has requested other "essential" employees come to work. The Service Employees International Union, which represents mechanics, supervisors and administrators, have been honoring the UTU's picket lines. Transit management faces a \$1.4 million deficit and is seeking wide benefit cuts to balance their budget. There are rumors that the transit authority is looking to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to intervene and order drivers back to work for 60 days.

Canada

Toronto hotel workers vote to strike

Workers employed by Fairmount Royal York hotel voted 79 percent in favor of strike action on September 27. The nearly 600 workers are members of UNITE HERE Local 75. Voting came after 15-day-long negotiations that broke off over the issues of wages, benefits, working conditions and workload. The Fairmount Royal York is owned by Legacy Hotel Corporation, the largest luxury hotel chain in Canada.

The strike vote comes in advance of negotiations for 4,000 other workers at 23 Toronto hotels whose contract expires in January of next year.

Regina civic workers end strike

Civic workers in Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, ratified an agreement on September 26 with city authorities ending a 26-day strike. The first full-scale civic strike in Regina's history started on August 31 after the city made its final offer of a 5 percent wage increase over three years and a lump-sum payment of \$500. Sixteen hundred workers represented by three union locals, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Locals 21 and 7 and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 588, had offered to settle for 6 percent.

The new deal, retroactive to 2004, was reached after eight hours of negotiations. It includes a compromise wage increase of 5.5 percent and was approved by a narrow margin of 68 percent of the 1,600 city workers. According to the CUPE Local 21 president, many workers were disappointed by the new contract and a breakdown in relations with the city is expected in the next negotiations planned for 2007 or during the civic election in 2006.



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