

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 October 2005

## Latin America

### Water and sewer workers strike in Costa Rica

Despite a negotiated settlement between management and the union bureaucracy, 3,000 workers at the state-owned Aqueduct and Sewer Company (AyA) continued their strike last Friday.

AyA management reported that the union had agreed to an 8.7 percent raise, far short of the workers' initial demand of 18 percent. Last week, workers rejected a 7.2 percent offer.

Many workers at AyA earn less than the legal minimum wage of US\$276 a month. Workers consider an 18 percent raise the minimum needed to bring them in line with the earnings of other public employees.

To mark the tenth day of the strike, strikers rallied last Tuesday in front of the presidential palace.

The union representing the AyA workers indicated the company is expected to achieve profits of US\$17.4 million this year, only US\$617,000 less than what it would take to satisfy workers' demands.

### Volkswagen strike continues in Brazil

On October 20, an assembly of blue-collar employees at Volkswagen's largest Brazilian plant at São Bernardo do Campo in São Paulo state voted to extend a strike that began on September 29. Workers voted to reject management's offer because it fell far short of their demands for a profit-sharing bonus of US\$2,200 per worker. VW's latest offer of US\$2,000 is tied to a production goal of 208,000 cars for 2005. Alternatively, management has offered US\$2,289, with a production quota of 210,058 automobiles. The factory employs 12,400 workers.

### Argentine transit workers battle police

On October 20, agents of the Buenos Aires police assaulted protesting cleaners in a city subway station. The battle began when the employees of several private contractors occupied the Miserere station, north of downtown, and blocked the tracks, demanding to be included in the same contract as other transit workers. Police fired tear gas in an attempt to clear the workers out of the station.

Workers and passengers were injured as a result of the police action. Workers at all five municipal subway lines staged a surprise strike for the remainder of the day in

solidarity with their coworkers.

### Teachers strike in the Dominican Republic

Teachers in the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, the Dominican Republic's second largest city, went on strike for 24 hours on October 18. The teachers report that the city owes them one year's wages. The Association of Dominican Professors (ADP) is also demanding an end to sackings and budget cuts.

An ADP spokesperson denied reports by the Education Ministry that the arrears had been resolved and pointed to the scandalous lack of desks and basic school supplies in the city's school system.

## United States

### Union charges Radio City with attempt to exploit Louisiana musicians

The American Federation of Musicians Local 802 is charging an unnamed New Orleans hiring agent with attempting to deceive members of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra into serving as strikebreakers at New York's Radio City Christmas show at Madison Square Garden. The Radio City musicians who traditionally perform for the annual Christmas extravaganza are currently involved in contract negotiations in which the union claims management has "proposed nothing to us other than threats, concessions and substandard conditions."

David Lennon, president of Local 802, told the *New York Times*, "They lied to [Louisiana Philharmonic musicians] up front. They said they wanted them to play the Radio City Christmas show, and that it was a gesture of charity, even with 802's blessing, when, in fact, that was not the case."

Hurricane Katrina left members of the Philharmonic completely out of work. Management for Radio City Entertainment, which puts on the Christmas show, refused to answer a direct question as to whether it consciously sought to exploit the situation facing the New Orleans orchestral musicians. The Radio City Christmas show grossed \$73.8 million last year.

### Talks in Vermont teachers' strike collapse

Talks between striking teachers in Colchester, Vermont, and district negotiators last week failed to bridge a gap on wages. The Colchester Education Association, which represents the 200 striking teachers, has come down two

steps from its original demand for an annual 5.8 percent wage to the current 4.5 percent over three years. The district has offered 3.5 percent in the first year and 3.25 in the subsequent two years.

The two sides have agreed to maintain current contract language governing health care. Teachers will continue to pay 20 percent of their premiums, a figure double that of other school districts.

Many Colchester residents are frustrated at management's attempts to drag out the strike, which began on October 10. They point out that the teachers current wage proposal is in line with a federal mediator's proposal of 4.5-4.8 percent. Some of this anger has been directed toward the Colchester school board chairwoman, Renn Niquette. Niquette also serves as a Republican Vermont legislator. She is charged with perpetuating the strike as a way of provoking a crisis in hopes of winning support for a legislative initiative she supports that would establish a uniform statewide teachers' contract.

#### **Tentative agreement in Illinois county workers' strike**

Negotiators for Madison County, Illinois, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 799 reached a tentative agreement October 22. Both the union and the county board will submit the proposal to their respective bodies for ratification on Monday. Neither county nor union negotiators would disclose the contents of the new contract.

The 400 county workers walked off the job October 12 over wages and health care. They have been without a contract since November 30 of last year.

#### **Canada**

#### **Workers attacked in Alberta meatpackers' strike**

Employees at Tyson Foods slaughterhouse in Brooks, southeast of Calgary, Alberta, have been on strike since October 12 after negotiations for a first contract broke off. It is expected that the strike, which has been marked by bitter confrontations, will be as lengthy as the strike in the 1980s that resulted in the destruction of the union. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) was certified again at the slaughterhouse only last year.

The strike has grown increasingly violent, with the union claiming that three of its members have been victims of a gang beating by supervisory personnel. UFCW Local 401 President Doug O'Halloran had to be hospitalized after being chased and driven off the road by Lakeside managers. Subsequently, the union pressed charges against the six men involved.

The meatpackers were poised to go on a strike as early as last July, when the provincial government intervened and introduced a 60-day delay, setting up a disputes inquiry board. The one-member panel made a report that was

accepted by workers but rejected by the company, which went on to make a contract offer that was rejected by the union.

About 60 percent of the employees are immigrants, mostly from Sudan. Tyson Foods, the largest meatpacker in the world, has been compared with Wal-Mart because of its tough labor and union-busting tactics. In February 2003, 470 workers at its Jefferson, Wisconsin, facility went on strike against Tyson's move to gut wages and benefits. The company is notorious for using scabs against low-wage, non-unionized immigrant workers and its use of "coyotes" to strong-arm recruits and intimidate workers.

#### **Strike at Alberta heavy equipment dealer**

On October 20, about 900 employees of Finning Canada went on strike in Edmonton, Alberta, with another 100 in Northwest Territories. The striking workers, who are represented by International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local 99, are heavy equipment technicians, warehouse partsmen and laborers. Their last contract ended in April this year.

The main issue in the strike is job security. The president of the local union said the company had laid off 200 workers and contracted out their jobs to its subsidiaries and joint ventures, and the union was concerned that without contract protection there would be more layoffs. The union is also seeking wage increases of 6, 5, and 5 percent in the next three years. Finning is a Caterpillar dealership and a major service and parts supplier of Alberta's oil and gas industry.

#### **Montreal Symphony Orchestra strike ends**

The five-month-long strike by musicians of Montreal Symphony Orchestra (l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, OSM) ended on October 17 when the musicians voted 96 percent in favor of a new seven-year contract. The strike began on May 9, with the musicians fighting a pay freeze and protesting an onerous schedule that required them to work more consecutive days than allowed by Canadian labor laws. In June, management was forced to scrap the rest of the summer season, canceling 13 concerts.

The new contract includes an 18.25 percent wage increase spread out from the 2003-2004 season through 2010. OSM musicians are members of the Montreal Musicians Guild, a unit of the American Federation of Musicians.



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