

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 November 2005

## Latin America

### Uruguayan doctors to strike

Last week an assembly of 4,000 public health doctors, members of Uruguay's Medical Union (SMU), voted unanimously to launch a strike November 3.

The assembly marked the end of a 48-hour strike. Other health workers in the public health system are also scheduled to walk out November 3.

The doctors are demanding a minimum monthly salary of US\$500, double the current minimum. They are also demanding the resignation of Public Health Minister María Julia Muñoz together with the top officials of that ministry.

### Argentine workers to protest Bush visit

Leaders of the Government Workers' Association (ATE) declared that their members will walk off their jobs November 4 to protest a visit by US President George W. Bush to the Argentine resort city of Mar Del Plata, where the Fourth Summit of the Americas is scheduled to take place.

Earlier this week the leadership of the Argentine Workers Central (CTA) had made a similar announcement.

### Sugar cane cutters strike in Brazil

One hundred thousand sugar cane cutters carried out an eight-day strike in Pernambuco, Brazil's easternmost state. The strike ended October 29.

Throughout the strike, picketers repeatedly and bravely confronted goon squads employed by the growers who were attempting to break the strike.

Aristides Santos, president of Pernambuco's Federation of Agricultural Workers (FETAPE), declared that the strike resulted in changes that will increase workers' incomes by 8.2 percent. Under the terms of the draft agreement, the growers commit themselves to installing scales to more accurately determine the cutters' share. Cutters are still paid according to a piecework system.

FETAPE sources indicate that the number of sugar cane cutters has dropped from 250,000 to 110,000, including 40,000 permanent and 70,000 temporary workers from across Brazil's Northeast. Each worker cuts an average of ten tons of sugar cane each season.

### Medical strike in Nicaragua

Nicaraguan medical doctors employed by the Ministry of Health walked off their jobs for 48 hours on October 27 to demand a wage increase of 140 percent. During the strike, Managua's hospitals were only treating emergency cases and

patients who had already been hospitalized.

A spokesperson for the strikers indicated that the strike would resume if negotiations do not begin by this Wednesday. Health Minister Margarita Gurdíán threatened the doctors with legal action if they persist in their job actions. She also declared that the doctors' demands were too high. Nicaraguan public health doctors earn US\$200-400 a month, depending on their seniority and specialty.

The union that represents nurses and other health services at the public hospitals is threatening to join the job actions. It is demanding a raise of 100 percent plus a bonus of US\$60 and increases in the allowances for uniforms and shoes. The entry level salary for a public health nurse in Nicaragua is US\$94.

### Foundry workers strike in Mexico

One thousand foundry workers walked off their jobs at the Nacoziari copper refinery in northern Mexico's Sonora state. At issue are payments owed to the workers since 2003. The strike ended on Thursday following intense negotiations.

No details were released. Nacoziari principally utilizes the ore that is mined in the nearby La Caridad mine, one of the largest copper mines in the world. It also processes ore from the Cananea mine. Both mines are close to the Mexico-US border.

### Hunger strike by sacked airline workers in Argentina

Five workers laid off by Aerolineas Argentinas (Argentine Airlines) have spent 12 days on hunger strike to protest their dismissal and are asking President Nestor Kirchner to intervene on their side "before we starve in the Aeroparque (one of Buenos Aires' main airports)," declared Guillermo Cortegoso, a hunger striker and union delegate. According to the Argentine daily *Página 12*, the strikers' health is rapidly deteriorating.

The hunger strike is a result of an impasse in negotiations between the airline and the pilots' and technicians' unions (APLA and APTA.) Union officials say that there has been no movement in negotiations between Aerolineas and the employees.

### United States

#### Striking California poultry workers returning to work

Workers at the Foster Farms poultry processing plant in Livingston, California are returning to work this week after having been out on strike since October 25 over wages. Foster Farms, the largest West Coast poultry producer, has attempted to divert attention away from working conditions and the \$9.50 to \$10.50 an hour it pays its employees, claiming bargaining broke down over the union's insistence on a closed shop.

According to the League of Independent Workers, which represents strikers and has recently affiliated with the International Association of Machinists, approximately 1,000 of the Livingston plant's 1,600 workers walked out on strike. Talks between the two sides broke off in May.

In 1997 workers at the Livingston plant went out on strike for 15 days and received only a five-cent per hour wage increase. The *Sacramento Bee* quoted one striker as saying workers were "betrayed" by the United Food and Commercial Workers union in that strike. Foster Farms employees about 11,000 workers, mostly in California, and had revenues of \$1.5 billion in 2003.

#### **Pennsylvania school support workers strike**

Support personnel for the Souderton Area School district, north of Philadelphia, walked out on October 27 after negotiators for the two sides failed to come to an agreement over wages and health care benefits. The 120 playground aides, classroom assistants, study hall monitors, in-school suspension aides and other personnel are currently paid \$9 an hour for a six-hour day, translating into a yearly salary of \$9,800.

The Souderton Area Education Support Personnel Association is asking for an increase just under 8 percent, while the school board is insisting on limiting it to 6.56 percent. The school district is also resisting the workers' demand for first-time benefits, despite the fact that other school support workers in the region receive them. Workers charge the school district has denied them step increases in pay they were scheduled to receive. School district and union negotiators are scheduled to resume bargaining November 2.

#### **Wal-Mart memo proposes attack on employees' health care**

The group Wal-Mart Watch has published an internal memo submitted to the company's board of directors which aims to squeeze more than \$1 billion a year by 2011 from its employees. The memo recommends hiring more part-time workers while not taking on unhealthy workers.

The memo, drafted by executive vice-president for benefits Susan Chambers, aims to avoid the hiring of unhealthy workers by requiring "all jobs to include some physical activity (e.g., all cashiers do some cart-gathering)." It noted, "The least healthy, least productive associates are more satisfied with their benefits than other segments and are interested in longer careers with Wal-Mart."

Currently, less than 45 percent of Wal-Mart workers receive company health benefits. The memo admits Wal-Mart discouraged its low-paid workforce from acquiring benefits, saying, "Wal-Mart's critics can easily exploit some aspects of our benefits offering to make their case; in other words, our critics are correct in some of their observations. Specifically, our coverage is expensive for low-income families, and Wal-Mart has a significant percentage of associates and their children on public assistance."

The memo also called for increasing the amount employees

pay for spouse coverage and cutting 401(k) contributions along with company paid life insurance policies.

#### **Canada**

#### **Toronto hotel workers poised to strike**

Over 800 workers at the Fairmont Royal York hotel voted by a margin of 63 percent against a company offer on October 25, raising the possibility of a strike. Workers are members of UNITE HERE Local 75 and include attendants, cooks, servers and other front-line workers at the hotel.

The negotiations have been going for almost a month. The union recommended that workers reject the contract offer because it would lead to cuts in family health care, contained no increase in retirement benefits, and did not adequately protect the health and safety of housekeeping staff who are experiencing increased injury and pain on the job. The president of the union local said that there is an ongoing "bed war" of luxury hotel chains over who will "provide the guests with the biggest mattresses, the thickest duvets and the most amenities," and that is taking a toll on the hotel workers.

#### **Ontario school workers step up job action**

Members of Peel Professional Student Services Personnel (PSSP) held an information picket at the Peel District School Board Office in Mississauga, Ontario on October 25. The union members, who work as psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists, and child and youth workers, have been without a contract since August 31, 2004. After the negotiations broke off in mid-June, they started a work-to-rule campaign.

At last week's rally, which marked an escalation of their struggle, more than 100 workers distributed leaflets highlighting the unresolved issues of wages, benefits, staffing levels and outsourcing of work. The union is in the process of planning for another escalation of their action, after which it will take a full strike vote if no agreement is reached.



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