Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 November 2005

Latin America

Nicaraguan public health workers to strike

On November 12, Nicaraguan public health workers announced that they will walk out on November 17. At issue is the government budget for health care, including wage increases and supplying hospitals with the necessary medicines and equipment.

The health workers union, FETSALUD, is independent of the doctors, who also are planning to walk out this week over wages, housing and other benefits.

Uruguayan public health doctors' strike in second week

A strike by 4,000 public health physicians in Uruguay is now in its second week. The doctors are demanding a starting wage of US$500, wage increases and wage parity among various sectors. The government insists that is it unable to meet the doctors' wage requests.

The strike is impacting primarily Montevideo, where doctors belong to the Uruguayan Doctors Union (SMU). The union that represents most doctors outside of Montevideo, FEMI, has yet to join the walkout.

Paraguayan hospital workers in budget fight

On November 11 the unions representing employees of the Clínicas Hospital, linked to the National Medical School of Asunción, began a strike demanding more funds for the hospital in 2006.

Employees of this teaching institution, Paraguay's biggest public hospital, are demanding an increase of 27,000 million guaraníes, about US$4.4 million, for next year, up from the current 14,000 million guaraníes. Workers report that each year the hospital runs out of money nine months into the budget.

During the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), the hospital became famous as a center of resistance to the brutality of the regime.

Brazilian oil workers vote to strike

The unions that represent oil workers at the state-owned Petrobras company voted to strike on November 17. Alessandra Murteira, spokeswoman for the United Federation of Oil Workers (FUP), announced that a 10 percent wage increase presented by Petrobras management last Thursday will be considered by the union leadership on November 15; consequently the strike may be cancelled. FUP had asked for a 10.2 percent raise for active and retired employees.

However, Murteira indicated that management does not wish to address the pension issue, one of the FUP's main demands. "We have 16,000 new employees without a proper pension plan," said Murteira, "that issue must be resolved." FUP is demanding that new employees be included in the company's pension pool.

Judicial attack on the right to strike in Costa Rica

According to the news agency Prensa Latina, on November 11 a Costa Rican court declared illegal a month-long strike by employees of the public Water and Sewage Company (AyA). In doing so the court now makes it possible for the government to suppress the strike.

No sooner was the decision announced than Labor Minister Fernando Trejos threatened to fire the strikers en masse if they did not return to work. He also threatened to cut strikers' wages.

The court decision was a result of a government appeal to a labor court's decision that the strike was legal and just.

The strike against AyA began on October 10. AyA workers earn an average of US$247 and are demanding a raise equivalent to what other public sector workers earn, US$276.

United States

Wisconsin truck manufacturer turns away returning strikers

Johnson Truck Bodies only allowed 15 former strikers to return to work October 31 after a seven-month strike by Teamsters Local 662. The union issued a press release on October 28 stating that all workers would be allowed to return to work. Many union members were angry at being turned away.

But a company representative disputed the union's claim, stating that workers would only be admitted back

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to work on a seniority basis and as vacancies permit. According to the company, many union positions have been filled by permanent replacements. The Teamsters did not respond to the company's clarification.

About 270 workers struck Johnson Truck on April 7 after the company, owned by Carlisle Companies, demanded, in addition to economic concessions, an open shop and the dropping of the automatic dues check-off.

Woman loses legs in accident aboard fishery boat

A 30-year-old pregnant woman working aboard a fish processing ship in the Bering Sea off Alaska's coast lost both her legs when the augers at the bottom of a vat she was cleaning started up. Rose Bard was nine hours into her 12-hour shift when the augers, which were supposed to be powered off, sucked her legs in and mangled them.

For two hours co-workers used a torch to cut through metal and free her while spraying water to prevent the heat from burning her. Bard then spent half a day on board the ship waiting for a Coast Guard helicopter to arrive and take her to Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage, where her legs were amputated just below the knees.

Bard, an ex-army soldier and former convenience store manager, left Ohio hoping to make money working for Seattle-based Supreme Alaska Seafoods, Inc. She was two months pregnant and also has an eight-year-old daughter.

Machinists strike Buffalo manufacturer

Workers at Buffalo Wire Works rejected the recommendation by its union leadership and voted overwhelming to strike the New York maker of wire mesh. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) came back to its 38-member bargaining unit with a contract that called for pay cuts, higher worker contributions to medical coverage, lost vacation and a freeze in the pension plan.

The company claims that foreign producers can now deliver product to the US market at 40 to 60 percent of the cost that Buffalo Wire Works charges. CEO Joseph Abramo told the *Buffalo News*, "I want to stay in Buffalo, but I have to change my model to adjust."

Ford to monitor bathroom breaks at Michigan plant

Management for Ford Motor Company at its Wayne, Michigan truck plant distributed a memo to workers informing them that bathroom breaks would be monitored. The company alleges that long bathroom breaks are impacting production of its sport utility vehicles.

The memo stated: "In today's competitive environment, it is important that Michigan Truck plant immediately address this concern to avoid the risks associated with safety, quality, delivery, cost and morale." The company intends to collect data on the issue and "respond appropriately."

Operating Engineers strike Washington State industrial facility

About 50 members of the Operating Engineers International Union struck one of Ameron International's plants in Everett, Washington over what the union said were violations of federal labor law. The union would not elaborate.

Ameron Chief Operating Officer Gary Wagner told the *Everett Herald* the strike emerged out of a "disagreement over contract terms." The two sides are currently negotiating a new agreement.

The Everett plant makes concrete poles for streetlights. Ameron manufacturers a wide range of products throughout the world, including oil and water pipelines.

Canada

Calgary casino strike ends

About 400 Calgary casino workers ratified a new contract on November 6 by a 73 percent margin. With the new deal, workers will receive a 4.5 percent wage increase over two years. The strike started on September 23 and included dealers, food servers, security staff and other non-management employees at the casino, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4655.

Maritime home care strike ends

Red Cross home support workers in New Brunswick, members of CUPE Local 4598, voted in favor of a tentative agreement on November 10, ending a three-month-old strike. Local 4598 represents home support workers in Richibucto, Miramichi, Acadian Peninsula, Bathurst, Campbellton, Edmundston and Grand Falls.

The strike began on August 18 in Bathurst, with Cambellton workers joining them on October 4 and those from Acadian Peninsula on October 10, with wages as the main issue. The new contract, which will expire in March 2009, gives them a raise of between 18 and 2 percent, as well as improved benefits, including vacation pay, statutory holiday and bereavement leave.

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