

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 November 2005

Latin America

Teachers strike in Calama, Chile

Educators at the Juan Pablo High School in Calama in northern Chile went on strike November 14 over wages. Management is offering a 3 percent raise plus a US\$7,500 bonus for 53 of the strikers. The workers consider the raise insufficient and rejected a bonus that would only benefit some of the strikers.

Striking teachers denounced the school administration for turning its back on the financial hardships they face.

Nicaraguan public health workers strike

On November 14, public health doctors and medical personnel walked off their jobs, paralyzing 32 hospitals and 164 clinics across this Central American nation. President Enrique Bolaños indicated that there would be no wage increases while negotiations continue. Bolaños said that government spending is constrained by an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, precluding virtually all concessions to public health employees.

Three thousand doctors are demanding a wage increase of 140 percent. Twenty thousand health employees are demanding a 100 percent raise. The latter are also demanding that millions be appropriated and used to buy hospital equipment.

Public health authorities estimate that meeting the strikers' demands would require adding another US\$117 million to the US\$164 million health budget. The government draft budget for 2006 proposes only US\$6 million for wage increases for doctors as well as other public health workers. Consequently, the Bolaños government has offered only a 9 percent increase.

Health Minister Margarita Gurdíán requested that the Labor Ministry declare the strike illegal, but the Labor Ministry denied the request. Were the strike to be declared illegal, the government would be authorized to dismiss the strike leaders.

Gustavo Porras, leader of the health union FETSALUD, indicated that the strike will last until November 22, to coincide with the National Assembly's debate on the 2006 fiscal budget. Protests were scheduled for November 21 across from the Managua offices of the International Monetary Fund.

Brazilian agriculture inspectors strike over wages

A two-week-long strike by agriculture inspectors is blocking exports and imports worth hundreds of millions, according to Hugo Caruso, president of the Association of Agriculture Ministry Inspectors for Paraná State. Caruso blamed federal authorities' indifference to workers' wage demands for the

walkout.

Under pressure from poultry producers that cannot export their goods, the Brazilian government announced last week that it intended to hire 400 veterinarians and agronomists to re-start Paraná state's exports. These strikebreakers would be hired on a temporary basis.

Airline workers strike in Argentina

Pilots, stewards and maintenance personnel of LAN airlines went on strike last week to protest management's failure to hire 150 former workers of Aerovip, a regional airline that shut down last year.

LAN Argentina is owned by the LAN group in Chile, which is owned by the presidential candidate of the right-wing National Renewal Party, Sebastián Piñera, who is standing in elections set for December 11. Management described the surprise one-day walkout on November 18 as "out of proportion and illegal."

LAN Argentina was formed last March as a successor to LAFSA airlines, which had been created by the Argentine government in 2003 in the wake of the bankruptcies of LAPA and DINAR. Part of the agreement that formed the new company was that it would absorb LAFSA's 650 employees.

The unions that represent LAN employees hold that LAN management also agreed to hire Aerovip's 150 workers. LAN insists that it has carried out all of its agreements with the unions and the government.

Public health workers strike in Honduras

Workers at Honduras's 28 public hospitals and 1429 clinics went on strike on November 14. The 28,000 health workers are demanding the government implement wage increases that it agreed to five years ago. According to an Associated Press report, union leader Bernardo Irías said that the government's foot-dragging left health workers with no alternative but to strike. "Our struggle is just and will surely escalate, given the government's intransigence," said Irías.

Health workers are demanding a raise of US\$17 in their monthly salaries, retroactive to the year 2000. By that account, they are owed US\$30 million.

Sergio Zavala, Honduras attorney general, accused the unions of blackmailing the government during an election season and threatened the unions involved in the protest with an indefinite ban. Presidential elections are scheduled to take place in Honduras on November 27.

United States

Radio City Music Hall lockout ends

Radio City Music Hall and its musicians ended a walkout on Thursday, November 17, when they reached a tentative agreement. The settlement was reached after Mayor Michael Bloomberg intervened to end the dispute, urging both sides to meet in City Hall on November 14 with former schools chancellor Frank Macchiarola. Details of the contract have not been publicized. The musicians started playing the next day.

The nine-week “Christmas Spectacular” holiday season show has won international acclaim and has been entertaining audiences from all over the world for the last 73 years. Even though a ticket can cost as much as \$250, 1.2 million people attended last year, resulting in \$74 million in sales. The show is performed six times a day for 90 minutes, and musicians have been required to play at least 12 shows a week.

The five-year contract ended last May. After prolonged negotiations, the 35 musicians, members of Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, walked out on November 2, the day before the holiday shows were scheduled to begin. The Rockettes dancers joined them in a one-day show of solidarity.

Afterward, a spokesman for Local 802 said that the union had accepted Radio City Entertainment’s offer, but that management officials had changed their minds at the last minute. The producers did not allow the orchestra to enter the hall and play, even though the musicians arrived for work in their tuxedos. Radio City then decided to replace them with canned music.

In addition to this lockout, James Dolan, president of Cablevision, which owns Radio City Music Hall, insisted that a contract would not be signed until the union agreed to issue a letter stating that the union lied about the status of the negotiations and that this be published in New York City newspapers at union expense. Union President David Lennon had indicated the union would agree to new contract of annual wage increases of 3 and 4 percent but would not sign such a statement.

Tentative contract for Pittsburgh transit workers

Leaders of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 85 accepted a tentative contract with the Allegheny Port Authority November 18, ending a strike threat. The agreement followed the intervention of Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, who flew to Pittsburgh to take part in negotiations. The contract covers 2,300 light rail and bus drivers, mechanics and other hourly workers

Rendell hailed the agreement, which he said would help reduce the state deficit. The tentative contract calls for a 3 percent pay raise for each of the next three years. Workers will also contribute 1 percent toward their health benefits.

California poultry processor fires strikers

Foster Farms fired 30 to 50 workers at its Livingston, California, chicken plant for participating in the most recent in a series of intermittent strikes. This was the third walkout in a two-month period called by the League of Independent

Workers, which recently affiliated with the International Association of Machinists (IAM).

The walkouts centered on charges of unfair labor practices, including harassment of union supporters. Management has rejected demands that all workers be required to join the union. It is not clear how many workers participated in the latest walkout at the 2,300-worker facility, but management claims a majority of employees stayed on the job.

Workers have been without a contract since May. The company has rejected union demands for a 50-cent-per-hour pay increase. Average pay at the facility is around \$10 an hour. There have been no recent contract talks.

Canada

Ottawa bus drivers launch job action

Bus drivers employed by Ottawa’s public transit service, OC Transpo, started a work-to-rule campaign on November 14 in an effort to pressure the city back to negotiations, which broke off the previous week over the contracting out of maintenance work on light rail. The drivers are represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union.

The last contract expired in March of this year, and so far actions have been limited to refusal to wear uniforms. According to a union representative, they are planning to keep increasing the pressure every three days leading up to a strike, for which the drivers have already given their approval.

For his part, Ottawa’s mayor has announced that if the work-to-rule becomes too disruptive, the city will consider a lockout.

Saskatchewan health care workers vote to strike

Two thirds of Saskatchewan health care workers voted on November 17 in favor of strike action if their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), cannot negotiate a deal with the provincial NDP government. The workers have been without a contract for 18 months. Workers from two other unions, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Unions, have given their support. CUPE represents about 12,000 health care workers in Saskatchewan.



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