

Workers' Struggles: The Americas

13 December 2005

Latin America

Peruvian public school teachers announce strike plans for 2006

Peruvian teachers are poised to strike this January to protest mass sackings and to demand more government money for the schools. Recently approved legislation is expected to result in the layoff of thousands of teachers.

Robert Huaynalaya Camposana, an official of the Peruvian Education Workers Union (SUTEP), announced last week that teachers intend to launch a strike of indefinite duration, as soon as the school year begins in 2006. Huaynalaya denounced the government of Alejandro Toledo for sacrificing education to the demands of Peru's international creditors and the International Monetary Fund. Huaynalaya indicated that schools will be left without teachers, particularly in Peru's rural areas.

The 2006 budget, approved by the legislature is smaller than the previous year's. While the legislature rejected a tax-cut measure proposed by Prime Minister Pablo Kuczynski, it did approve an accelerated repayment of Peru's US\$1.5 billion debt to the Paris Club of creditor nations, at the expense of education and other social programs.

Protest in Machu Picchu

A 48-hour protest took place last week in the vicinity of Machu Picchu, with demonstrators accusing the Mayor of Cuzco of corruption in the purchase of city buses. Protestors blocked the rail line that leads to this pre-Columbian city, which is Peru's most popular tourist attraction. The protest forced Peru Rail, the operator of the line between Cuzco and Machu Picchu, to suspend service after a train was blocked with rocks and tree trunks. The protest ended on December 7.

Argentina airline workers strike

Employees of Southern Winds airline walked off their jobs on December 9 to demand that the company immediately pay them salaries that are in arrears. Union leaders also charged management with dismantling the company. Only one of its eight airplanes was working at the time the strike began.

Also last week, unions representing pilots and mechanics at Aerolineas Argentinas announced that they would sue the Argentine Government and airline management for interfering with the right to strike. Aerolineas workers are in the midst of a dispute of wages and layoffs at the airlines.

Subway workers strike in Buenos Aires

Workers at Buenos Aires's five metro lines walked off their jobs in a one-day strike December 5 to press for a wage increase. The action followed a breakdown in negotiations between the workers and management at the Labor Ministry.

The subways employees are demanding a 58 percent wage increase and have rejected a 21 percent offer from the private operator of the lines—Metrovias. The unions also demand that the agreement cover those temporary and part-time workers not directly employed by the company. While there is no agreement on these issues, the unions have accepted an interim agreement on other issues.

Union leaders declared that as far as they are concerned, the strike was merely suspended and that it can resume at any moment.

United States

New York University threatens striking graduate student-workers

After issuing a series of strike-breaking threats, New York University (NYU) is claiming that 75 percent of the graduate student teaching assistants who walked out on November 9 were back in the classrooms and teaching undergraduate students. The university said it would determine exactly which of the 1,000 graduate assistants remained on strike before it imposed last week's threat to eliminate the \$19,000-a-year stipend for all those who did not return to their assigned duties.

A union spokesman disputed the university's claims and maintained that the number of those still on strike is much higher. Furthermore, the leaders of the walkout stated that they have no intention of bringing it to an end until NYU meets its demands. The graduate students,

members of local 2110 of the United Automobile Workers who work as teaching and research assistants, are demanding that the university recognize and negotiate with the union.

Backed by a recent National Labor Relations Board ruling that claimed that the teaching assistants are students not workers, NYU has refused to recognize the union. The university has acknowledged that the strike has affected the ability of the school to function. In response, about 5,000 international scholars have signed an open letter that has appeared on the Internet protesting the university's anti-union position and its threats against the graduate student-workers.

Communication workers' union reaches deal with AT&T

The Communication Workers of America and AT&T said they had reached a tentative agreement late Sunday, December 11, on a contract for more than 11,000 workers nationwide. The CWA extended the contract beyond the strike deadline in order to reach an agreement. Workers will vote on the deal over the next several weeks.

AT&T praised the agreement—which provides wage increases that barely keep up with the rate of inflation—for enabling the company to “control our cost structure.” The agreement increases the employee co-pays and maximum out-of-pocket limits for medical and prescription drug benefits for employees and retirees, AT&T said. Also, the agreement makes provisions that before an employee is laid off, AT&T will offer him or her another position in the company.

San Antonio-based S-B-C Communications bought AT&T for \$16 billion last month and renamed the company AT&T Incorporated.

Tentative agreement in Ohio teachers' strike

Negotiators for the school district and the union representing striking teachers in Bridgeport, Ohio, reached a tentative agreement December 7 to end a four-week strike. Members of the Bridgeport Education Association walked out on strike charging they were the lowest-paid teachers in Belmont County. The new agreement, yet to be ratified by teachers, represented a compromise. In the first year teachers would receive a 3.25 percent raise, and another 3.0 percent raise in the second year. Teachers with 16 years and less will also receive an additional step increase.

During the strike, security guards were accused of assaulting teachers. The district was also accused of hiring substitute teachers that may not have been certified. Both guards and teachers were hired through the Huffmaster

Company in Michigan.

Indiana workers reject new contract, continue strike

Workers at an Indiana pump and meter manufacturer rejected a new contract offer December 4 aimed at ending a three-week strike. Members of Teamsters Local 414 in Fort Wayne voted 113 to 14 to reject a second offer by Tuthill Transfer Systems that calls for deeper cuts in benefits.

The new agreement offers workers wage increases of \$1 an hour in the first year, followed by subsequent annual increases of 45 cents and 46 cents. However, in the new contract's first year alone, workers would lose an estimated 40 cents an hour due to increased health care costs.

Two days after workers voted down the latest offer, Tuthill management moved to hire 100 replacement workers. Tuthill operates 26 facilities around the world.

Workers strike Kentucky Pepsi plant

Members of Teamsters Local 651 walked out on strike December 5 against the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company's attempt to wipe out seniority rights for new job posts. The 44 inside workers had voted unanimously to reject the company's last offer, despite a recommendation by the Teamsters negotiating committee.

In the past, company job postings were awarded on the basis of seniority when all other qualifications were equal. According to a Pepsi spokesperson, the new seniority clause would only affect future employees. Some 20 drivers, represented by a separate union, continue to work during the strike.

Chicago union official embezzles workers' health care payments

A former union official has admitted embezzling more than \$110,000 from a Chicago local of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Carol McCormack, a controller and office manager for UFCW Local 100-A, took the money from union members' health care payments during the period 1997-2001.

As a result of her plea bargain, McCormack will be sentenced on February 21 and could end up serving from 12 to 18 months under federal guidelines.



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