

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 December 2005

Latin America

Strike in Ciudad Juarez

One hundred twenty employees of the hippodrome and dog track in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, went on strike on Saturday. The main issue is a demand for a 10 percent pay raise. Workers are also owed one month's pay.

Chilean rail workers reject mine owner's offer, strike continues

Striking workers employed by the Ferrocarril de Antofagasta a Bolivia (FCAB), the rail line that connects Chile's copper mines with processing plants and the northern ports, rejected management's offer last week. Consequently, the strike that began on December 7 will continue. All 365 of the company's rail workers are on strike.

Union leader Guillermo Gonzalez told the Reuters news agency that there is no prospect for further negotiations. The strike is over wages and to protest management's plans to employ Bolivian workers to perform the jobs of some of the Chilean railroad employees.

University strike in Brazil establishes a record

The strike against 31 federal universities in Brazil entered its 109th day on December 16, breaking a 25-year-old Brazilian record for strikes in the education sector.

However, university employees will suspend the strike through the Christmas and New Year's holidays. The work stoppage may resume in January depending on legislative approval of a wage increase.

Brazilian President Luis Inacio "Lula" da Silva signed draft legislation granting the professors a 9.45 percent raise; the docents had demanded 18 percent. Congress must still vote on the proposal.

Striking truck drivers block Central American traffic in Honduras

Truck owner-operators in southern Honduras blocked highways leading into Nicaragua and El Salvador

December 16 to protest government inaction over their demands.

The operators blocked traffic between the cities of Choluteca and Guasaule on the Nicaraguan Border and at Amatillo on the border with El Salvador.

Strike leader Ruben Flores declared that the 24-hour protest was over the failure of the government to grant permits to the operators. The strikers are demanding that Armando Baca, regional director of transportation from Southern Honduras, be removed from his post. Baca denounced the strikers, accusing them of lying.

United States

Court-mandated negotiations in Pennsylvania teachers' strike

In an unprecedented action, a Pennsylvania judge has ordered 10 days of negotiations between a teachers' union and school district officials. The decision came after a series of breakdowns in contract talks between the Crestwood Education Association and negotiators for the district over health care benefit cuts. That led to the imposition of a unilateral contract by the district on December 8, followed by teachers refusing to go to work on December 12.

The judge barred the district from unilaterally imposing a contract on teachers, but will not rule on whether the teachers' refusal to report to work constituted a strike or implied a lockout, given that the school board unilaterally changed terms of employment. Currently, teachers are working under their old agreement while negotiations proceed. The judge has also imposed a gag order that prohibits either side from discussing negotiations.

The teachers' refusal to work December 12 created a crisis at the school as administrators herded some 600 Crestwood high school students into the gymnasium and held them there until buses could be brought in. A group of students staged a walkout. Junior Cindy Mirra told the *Times-Tribune*, "It's chaos in there," after walking out. "Everyone's yelling. I don't think we

should have had school today. It was stupid.” School superintendent Richard Duffy said he was “dealing with” those students who walked out.

Washington Ballet cancels performance over contract deadlock

Management of the Washington Ballet cancelled the December 15 performance of the annual “Nutcracker” following a stalemate in contract negotiations with the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). The ballet company’s executive director, Jason Palmquist, attempted to defend his action to close the performance by declaring the dancers’ union had called a strike, but the AMGA charges it was locked out.

As the opening of the “Nutcracker” in the nation’s capital approached with no contract in sight, the AGMA produced a two-page interim agreement that, if accepted by management, would have allowed the performance to go forward. But the ballet company rejected this measure.

The two-page proposal attempted to provide dancers with basic protections governing rehearsals in order to protect against overwork and injury. Already, lead ballerina Michelle Jimenez has suffered a stress fracture. Another dancer had to have a screw implanted in a foot, and a third fell several feet, landing on his back during what has been described as a rushed stage exit.

The December 15 cancellation of the “Nutcracker” represented the first time in more than 40 years that the ballet has halted its Christmas offering. The revenues from the “Nutcracker” have been used to finance the rest of the ballet’s performing season.

Canada

Strike at Quebec ski resort

Nearly 1,500 employees at Mont Tremblant ski resort in Quebec walked off the job on December 16, closing one of eastern Canada’s most popular ski destinations. Initially, it was a 24-hour walkout; however, the next day they decided to remain on strike. They had been in legal strike position since December 12. A spokesman of their union, Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), said that the Mont Tremblant employees earn an average of C\$13.95 and are demanding an increase of 15 percent, which will give them parity with hotel workers across the province. The workers are also demanding the introduction of a pension plan.

Quebec bookstore workers ratify deal

Three hundred fifty employees at the Renaud Bray bookstore chain, who had been on strike since December 1, ratified a new deal on December 15. The new contract includes a wage increase of 8.5 percent over four years and an improved severance system, but the union’s demands for other benefits were not met. The workers’ previous contract expired at the end of last year.



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