

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 January 2006

## Protests in Venezuela over lack of housing

On Friday, January 27, four protests took place simultaneously in cities across Aragua state in Venezuela. At issue was the lack of housing for over 11,000 people. In the city of Maracay, protesters blocked the main routes of access into downtown with burning tires. Caracas's daily *El Universal* talked to Tibisi Santana, a leader of the Community Housing Organization (OCV), who explained that over 300 families in the city have waited for over seven years for adequate housing and live under less than human conditions, lacking most basic services. She described a shantytown made of discarded materials whose residents have access to potable water only once a week when a tank truck makes its rounds. Some weeks the truck does not show up, said Santana.

Many of the shanty homes are built on low-lying lands that are prone to flooding.

A recent report by the Ministry of Housing (MINVIH) indicates the existence of a severe housing crisis in Venezuela. According to the MINVIH report, 100,000 homes need to be built this year.

## Border protest against anti-immigrant wall

On Friday, January 28, leaders of human rights and immigrant organizations assembled on the Mexican shores of the Rio Bravo to protest the building of a wall that will prevent undocumented immigrants from crossing into the United States. Rio Bravo separates the US city of Laredo from the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo.

The demonstration was led by Francisco Chavira, leader of the Mexico-USA United Front (FUMU), to call attention to the building of this wall and to demand that Tamaulipas state authorities urge the US Congress not to authorize the wall. According to a Mexican daily newspaper, *La Jornada*, Chavira declared: "We should not forget that the United States opposed the Berlin Wall, calling it a 'wall of shame.' This wall will be much bigger. Many Texas-based organizations reject

this plan."

The construction of the wall is part of draft anti-immigration legislation, HR4437, that would criminalize undocumented immigration. Friday's protest was part of a cross-border campaign. Human rights activists have announced a march on Washington DC in defense of immigration rights on February 22.

## Nicaraguan doctors protest in Managua

Striking doctors marched in Managua on January 27 to press for their wage demands. Three thousand public health doctors have been on strike since November 2005. The marchers demanded that Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos negotiate directly with the Federation of Doctors for a Wage Increase, the association leading the struggle.

The strikers are insisting on 70 percent raises this year and next to make up for years of low wages.

Government officials reacted angrily to the protest; health minister Margarita Gurdian called it a provocation. According to Gurdian the strikers are taking advantage of a government commitment not to use violence against the strikers.

Despite denouncing the strike week, the Sandinista union that represents other health workers (FETSALUD) threatened last week to join the walkout. FETSALUD is demanding a 45 percent wage increase for its 20,000 members and that all public health services at hospitals and clinics be provided free of charge to patients.

## Mexico: University employees threaten to strike

Employees of Mexico's Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) marched last Thursday from Mexico's monumental Anthropology Museum to the presidential mansion in Los Pinos, demanding a just wage and an end to contract violations. Regarding the latter demand, UAM employees are particularly upset about the closure of one of the child development centers on campus.

The marchers reject an administration wage offer of a

4.9 percent increase in wages and benefits. Jorge Ramos, general secretary of the UAM Workers Independent Union (SITUAM), said that workers would strike February 1 unless the university comes up with a proposal that is acceptable to the strikers. He indicated that SITUAM is not likely to extend the strike deadline.

### **Tentative agreement in New York Yellow Pages strike**

A tentative agreement was reached January 27 in the 13-week strike by 280 Verizon Yellow Pages workers in New York. The strike began after contract talks back in October bogged down over sales goals used by the company for paying commissions to its sales workers.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) District One accused Verizon of revising its sales goals in an effort to reduce compensation. According to the CWA, the new agreement provides “greatly enhanced assurances” that Verizon’s sales goals are realistic and prohibits management from altering them.

Non-sales personnel received annual hourly wage increases of 3.5 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent over the course of a three-year agreement. Workers’ contributions to health insurance will be capped in the third year of the contract. Should strikers ratify the agreement, they would return to work February 6.

### **California laundry workers strike**

About 300 workers struck Angelica Corporation’s industrial laundry in Colton, California after rejecting a final offer that failed to address wage and pension issues. The workers, recently organized by UNITE HERE, earn a mere \$8.00 per hour, which is about one dollar less than other workers at Angelica facilities in Southern California.

The striking workers have no pension plan, a benefit provided to other Angelica workers. Angelica’s Colton plant supplies laundering services to a large number of hospitals in the region.

### **New York nurses protest contract negotiations**

Registered nurses at New York’s Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx set up informational picket lines January 23 to protest the failure of management to take seriously their demands in contract talks. It has been more than a year since the contract covering 2,000 members of the New York State Nurses Association expired.

Currently, the hospital is offering new nurses a 3

percent wage increase and veteran nurses about 2 percent. Nurses are also protesting increasing workloads and low staffing levels.

### **Nova Scotia gypsum workers end strike**

Ninety workers employed by North Carolina-based National Gypsum in Milford, Nova Scotia, voted January 25 to accept a contract offer worked out through a provincial mediator, ending a strike that began last August. A representative of the workers’ union, the International Union of Operating Engineers, gave no details of the deal, but said that “there was enough movement on the issues of pensions and benefits to make it acceptable.”

The employer hired replacement workers during the walkout.

### **Manitoba school strike ends without a contract**

After striking for almost two months, 100 support workers at the Turtle River School Division in Manitoba ended their strike on January 26, without a new contract. Their union, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), agreed to end the strike if the school board withdrew the two applications with the Manitoba Labour Board against the union.

The main issue in the strike was the union’s request for wage parity with other school divisions in that part of the province. Both sides have agreed that if a new agreement is not reached soon, they will accept the terms set by an arbitrator.



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