Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 March 2006

Latin America

Nicaraguan bus drivers to strike

Bus drivers in Nicaragua's capital city, Managua, are on partial strike this week to press for a quick resolution of their demand for a US$ 4.8 million subsidy, already approved in principle by the government of President Enrique Bolaños.

The government had agreed to the subsidy in the wake of last month's strike by bus owner-operators. The drivers are seeking relief from the high cost of fuel.

Rafael Quinto, President of the Regional Union of Collective Transportation Cooperatives (URCTC), said that as part of this strategy, only 450 buses operated on March 6, half the usual number. Quinto accused the country's legislature of stalling on draft legislation that would impose a 3 percent tax on oil company profits to subsidize public transit.

The draft legislation is being strongly opposed by oil companies, which have threatened to withhold fuel from Nicaragua. The International Monetary Fund, which is overseeing Nicaragua's goverment budget, described the tax proposal as "confiscatory."

Peru: Doctors strike

Public health doctors concluded a week-long strike in Peru on March 4, declaring a truce for negotiations to move forward. At issue are jobs for laid-off doctors, higher benefits for retirees and an increase in the national budget for public health.

On March 3, striking doctors picketed the Health Ministry building in Lima to demand that the government rehire laid-off doctors and provide for retired doctors. "They have been denied the possibility of an increase for their meager pensions," said Julio Vargas, President of the National Medical Association (ANM). Vargas chided the Peruvian government for not allowing negotiations to take place.

A total of 13,500 doctors are employed by the public health system in Peru. Negotiations are expected to take place this week.

Last year, public health physicians struck for 17 days. Part of an agreement signed by the government on March 2005 to end the strike has not been carried out according to the striking doctors. While wages did increase as a result of last year's strike, the doctors consider that the current health budget, US$ 700 million, is inadequate. The current budget represents 4 percent of Gross Domestic Product. The physicians are demanding that it be raised to 7 percent of GDP to make it possible to expand the network of hospitals and extend vaccinations to all the country's children.

Ecuadorean workers to strike this week

The unions in Ecuador set a March 8 date for a national strike to oppose a free trade treaty with the United States. The strike will also demand that the government break all ties with Occidental Petroleum, a US-based transnational company currently exploiting Ecuador's oil reserves in ecologically fragile areas.

The Ecuadorian government headed by President Alfredo Palacios is set to finalize negotiations with the United States at the end of this month.

Argentine municipal workers strike, occupy maintenance facilities

On March 2, Jorge Brignole, the mayor of the city of Posadas in northeastern Argentina, withdrew a monthly wage increase offer of 150 pesos (about US$50) that was rejected by municipal workers, on strike for 16 days. The municipal employees are demanding 350 pesos. The workers, who have been asking for raises since 2004, have occupied some of the city's maintenance facilities.

The status of the negotiations is not clear. The mayor has said the strikers have been replaced. Last week, following a meeting of the municipal council, Brignone approached a picket line in a provocative manner. At least one of the members of the municipal council, Silvia Risko, declared that she was worried about Brignole's mental stability.

Brignole indicated that he, and not the union, is managing the conflict and accused the union of defending those workers that are no longer employed by the city. "We had warned them that if they walked out, we would fire workers under contract and hire new people." Brignole fired more than 300 workers during the first week of the strike. He now accuses them of trespassing and theft, arguing that they are no longer employed by the city.

On February 27, striking workers marched and rallied in downtown Posadas, demanding that their comrades be rehired.

A Posadas newspaper, *El Diario*, described the atmosphere

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surrounding this struggle as one of “irrationality” that will make it difficult to settle the conflict. The strikers have appealed to the government of Misiones Province to help settle the conflict.

Buenos Aires hospital workers strike

Employees at 33 Buenos Aires hospitals walked out for 24 hours on March 3. The health workers are asking for a 25 percent raise. The non-medical personnel are also demanding that workers be hired for job vacancies that have not been filled.

The strikers charge that some of the hospitals and clinics are operating with only 30 percent of the required staff because vacancies have not been filled in 14 years.

Mexican sugar workers on strike

Sugar-processing workers at the San Cristobal Mill in Veracruz, Mexico, have been on strike for more than 10 days. Negotiations are at a standstill, prompting concern among industry and government officials that 1.2 million tons of sugar cane will spoil. The sugar harvest cannot continue in the region while the mills are shut. Nearby mills, which are not on strike, do not have the capacity to process all the cane.

Union leader Oscar Arroyo, of the National Farmworkers Confederation (CNC), said that the strike was sparked by the failure of the sugar firms to pay a profit-sharing bonus of 58 million pesos (about US$5.5 million) to 3,000 employees.

The San Cristobal mill is the largest in Latin America, with the capacity to process 2 million tons of sugar cane each season.

United States

Strikers injured on picket line in California hospital strike

Picket line incidents injured three strikers at Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley, California, last week. One woman was pepper-sprayed by a strikebreaker, while a man and a woman were hit in separate incidents by cars. Kathy Silva, an operating room administrative assistant, was taken to the hospital’s emergency room with minor injuries to her hips and legs. Later, she returned to the picket line, telling the *Contra Costa Times*, “I want to support my employees. We need to stick together.”

On March 2, at a noontime rally outside the hospital, about a dozen doctors in their white lab coats appeared on the picket lines to show support for strikers. They told the press that Sutter Health, which runs the hospital, is only concerned with the bottom line.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represents the striking clerical and food service workers, as well as licensed vocational nurses who have been without a contract for three years.

Massachusetts teachers protest deadlocked negotiations

Teachers in Brockton, Massachusetts, launched informational pickets last week to make public their dissatisfaction with the lack of movement over health insurance and salary issues in the current negotiations with the school district. The 1,400 members of the Brockton Educational Association are seeking a 13 percent salary increase over the course of a three-year agreement, while administration is insisting on 8.3 percent.

The teachers’ union ended the mediation process on February 1 and filed an unfair labor practice charge against the School Committee. The two sides began their negotiations more than a year ago, and teachers last demonstrated back in November.

Canada

Guelph municipal workers accept contract

Five hundred and sixty inside and outside municipal workers ratified a new three-year deal on February 25, ending a 10-day strike in the city of Guelph, west of Toronto, Ontario. The main issue in the strike was job security. Guelph public workers became concerned last year, when the city tried to contract out a program called Wet Dry Plus. That attempt was defeated, but the workers went on strike to pressure the city to sign a deal that will give them protection against contracting out.

Guelph workers, who are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Locals 241, 973, and 1946, do public works, wastewater treatment, and technical and clerical services at city hall, and work at the city’s public library branches.

Ontario steelworkers vote to strike

About 450 workers at Haley Industries Ltd. in Renfrew, Ontario (about 90 kilometers west of Ottawa), voted to strike if no deal can be reached by the time their current contract expires on March 15. The issues in their dispute include wages, pensions, seniority and hours of work. The workers are represented by United Steelworkers Local 4829. Haley Industries, a division of Magellan Aerospace Corp., manufactures precision aluminum castings for the aerospace industry.

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