# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**28 March 2006**

**Latin America**

**Health workers' strike ends in Pernambuco, Brazil**

A 10-day strike by 23,000 public health workers in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco ended on March 24 after the state government agreed to submit draft legislation to improve working conditions and promotion policies.

The agreement also raises the monthly wage floor from R$174 to R$300 (about US$100) for the lowest rung of workers; R$201 to R$400 for the middle rung; and R$584 to R$800 for the top wage earners. The union had originally demanded wage floors of R$350, R$600 and R$1213 for each of the categories. In addition, there will be a wage increase of between 8 and 10 percent.

**Nicaraguan health workers continue strike**

Last week's negotiations between the administration of President Enrique Bolaños and the health workers union (FETSALUD) failed to resolve the impasse to end a two-month-long strike by 20,000 public health employees.

The strikers demand a 30 percent wage increase and improved working conditions, all of which would cost about US$10 million. According to FETSALUD leaders, public health officials admit that obtaining most of the funds is not a problem. Government authorities insist that the health budget and an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) cap the wage increase at US$1.6 million. President Bolaños has stated that the IMF will only permit a 9 percent wage increase. IMF officials plan to visit Nicaragua this May for further negotiations.

Also on strike, but in a different union, are public health doctors. Public health hospitals have been providing only emergency service since November 14, 2005. FETSALUD leaders are calling on civic groups and student organizations to mobilize in support of the strikers.

**La Caridad miners on strike**

One thousand Mexican copper miners at the La Caridad mine in Sonora state went on strike last Friday. Management has declared the strike illegal, claiming that workers had agreed to postpone any work stoppage until April 21. Miners claim that their agreement not to strike expired on March 5. The miners are demanding a new contract that provides better working conditions and higher wages.

Grupo Mexico also owns the Pasta de los Conchos mine in Coahuila state, where an explosion killed 65 miners on February 19. The bodies have not yet been recovered.

**United States**

**Comair flight attendants vote to strike**

Flight attendants at Delta Airlines' low-cost subsidiary Comair voted by a 93 percent margin to strike if a bankruptcy court allows management to void contracts and impose $8.9 million in annual concessions. The announcement was made March 24 by the Teamsters union, which represents the carrier's 900 attendants.

Hearings on the request to void the union contracts began March 27 and are scheduled to be resolved by April 10. The proposed concessions translate into pay cuts of between 16 and 24 percent or about $5,600 annually. Comair flight attendants earn between $16,000 and $40,000 a year.

**United Parcel Service calls on Congress to cut pensions**

United Parcel Service has been pressing Congress to allow companies to cut pension benefits promised to workers under plans funded by multiple employees. Multi-employer plans cover 9.8 million US workers, and, as of 2003, they were $177 billion in the red because many companies that previously paid into these funds are now out of business.

UPS, which has spent more money on US elections than any other company, recently backed a clause in a

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legislative bill that went through the House of Representatives last December. The provision would allow the pension plan's trustees, which include company and union representatives, to cut benefits for workers retiring early if the plans are less than 60 percent funded.

The pension plans include the largest one, the Central States plan, which is also less than 60 percent funded. Mergers in the trucking industry, combined with concessions from unions such as the Teamsters, have undermined pensions. In 1980, some 900 companies organized by the Teamsters paid into pensions. Today that number has fallen to 15.

**Canada**

**Strike at University of Prince Edward Island**

About 375 university staff at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) went on strike on March 22 after negotiations broke off the previous night. The most important issue for striking workers is wage parity with other universities in the region. Professors are claiming that the latest proposal by the university puts them in last place. The web site of the staff's union, the University of Prince Edward Island Faculty Association (UPEIFA), says staff would need a 9.88 percent increase in wages in order to reach the current average, rising to 12.29 percent for the top scale. UPEIFA is also demanding a reduction in the teaching workload. PEI faculty has been without a contract since July 1, 2005.

The Faculty Association said it won't obstruct traffic heading into the university, but classes have been cancelled for the university's 4,000 students. One day after the strike started, the provincial premier, Pat Binns, indicated that the government would issue back-to-work legislation if the strike continues for too long.

**Nova Scotia paperworkers march in protest of lockout**

On March 18, 600 paperworkers, members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), marched in Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia, to protest the lockout imposed January 26 by their employer, the Swedish-Finnish paper company Stora Enso. Workers have effectively been off work since Christmas, when the plant shut down for holidays. The key issues in the dispute are management's contracting-out policies and seniority rights. Stora Enso is attempting to break out of the Eastern Canada pattern settlement accepted by other paper manufacturers in the region, which includes a limit on management's right to outsource unionized work.

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