

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 April 2006

Latin America

Immigrant garment workers protest in Buenos Aires

On April 5 over 2,500 garment workers marched in the Flores, an industrial neighborhood in Buenos Aires. The garment workers, who are for the most part immigrants from Bolivia, were protesting the closure of their factories. The workers are demanding the reopening of plants, decent jobs and the right to become lawful residents.

A fire at a factory in which six immigrant workers died sparked an investigation by government authorities, who discovered the plant employed 50 workers in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Four of the dead workers were underage. Over 50 sweatshops were closed last week, accused of “promoting slavery.” The plants have been given two weeks to comply with labor laws and industrial regulations.

Municipal authorities estimate that as many as 1,600 small factories—including 160 textile sweatshops—operate with labor provided by Bolivian immigrants; as many as 4,000 workers are forced to live in the factories and work 16 hours a day for substandard wages.

The workers and their families made homeless by the closures are being housed in a stadium. Buenos Aires is home to an estimated 700,000 Bolivian immigrants, 15,000 of whom work under conditions of illegality. Many of these workers are contracted in Bolivia and promised good wages and working conditions. Once they arrive many of them earn as little as US\$40 per month.

Sao Paulo to evict 468 families

Sao Paulo authorities are threatening to evict 468 families from an abandoned building near the city’s commercial center. According to an Amnesty International press release, the eviction violates international norms and, given the Sao Paulo’s police reputation for brutality, put the families in grave danger. None of the families have been given alternative housing.

The building in question, an abandoned factory, is 22 stories high and had been empty for 12 years when the families, workers from Brazil and other South American countries, took over the building in November 2003. With the help of community groups the families made the building habitable. The building, formerly a place where drugs were sold, now houses a library and an art gallery.

The improvements notwithstanding, the city government now insists that the families leave by April 15. Amnesty

International said that in past eviction attempts the Sao Paulo police threatened residents with their weapons and therefore it believes there is a high likelihood of violence in this instance.

Last year the police carried out five evictions from occupied buildings. In one case riot-equipped police evicted 79 families from an abandoned building in downtown Sao Paulo; men, some as young as 14, were severely beaten during the police action.

According to the Brazilian Press Agency Adital, the occupation of abandoned buildings is common in this industrial city. Sao Paulo suffers from a chronic shortage of affordable housing and there are 10,000 homeless people in the city.

Sao Paulo teachers strike

April 7 marked the eleventh day of a strike by Sao Paulo school teachers. Last Friday the teachers voted to continue the job action at an assembly that followed a march of 20,000 teachers through the city center. Among the teachers’ demands are a starting monthly wage of 960 reales (about US\$320), an end to the privatization of public schools, and a reduction in class sizes. Teachers currently earn 615 reales per month.

United States

Wage modification ends Denver transit strike

Striking Denver transit workers approved a modified contract April 7 and the executive board of the city’s Regional Transportation District (RTD) gave approval over the weekend for the resumption of transit activity. The 1,750 members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1001 voted by an 82 percent margin to bring their five-day strike to an end.

The original contract proposal by the RTD, which was supported by the ATU leadership, called for a \$1.80-an-hour increase to be paid out in 15-cent increments on a quarterly basis over the life of the three-year agreement. The new proposal put 50 cents of the pay increase up-front and retroactive to March 1. The RTD also agreed to increase its contribution to health care insurance by \$20 a month and pay more into a health and welfare trust fund.

Transit workers deeply resented the \$40,000 to \$50,000 salary increases that the RTD board awarded two years ago to a number of transit management officials. The executive pay raises came shortly after transit workers agreed to a wage freeze. RTD General Manager Cal Marsella, who voted for the increases, defended his support for handing out the raises in the midst of the strike. Marsella himself has seen his yearly salary rise from \$107,500 to \$236,855.

Walkout by Iowa City bus drivers

School bus drivers in Iowa City walked off the job April 4 and 5 to protest working conditions and harassment by the First Student company, which contracts busing service for 6,000 of the city's students. The strike was sparked by company harassment of workers seeking Teamsters representation for the 117 district drivers.

The previous week, the Teamsters filed an unfair labor practice charge alleging First Student used hour and wage reductions, route changes, forced time studies and performance tests against three drivers who advocated unionization. Teamsters indicated they would file a second charge after the company threatened driver Frank Pierce with a time audit after he spoke out against the company at a March 28 school board meeting.

Twenty drivers walked off the job on the first day of the job action and 50 drivers stopped work the following day. The Teamsters union is insisting on a representation vote within 11 days of the walkout's conclusion. First Student wants to delay the representation vote for another 35 days. First Student is a subsidiary of the British-owned First Group. The American arm of the company has grown rapidly, rising to the position of second largest US contractor for school bus services.

Delta pilots vote to strike

Pilots at Delta Airlines voted overwhelmingly to strike if an arbitration panel agrees to company demands to void its contract with the Air Line Pilots Association. The vote comes as the bankrupt air carrier is seeking to impose a second round of concessions on pilots amounting to \$305 million in annual pay cuts. The arbitration panel has until April 15 to make its decision. The pilots union has given its chairman the authority to call a strike any time after April 17.

Waste Management workers on strike in New York

One hundred and twenty-three sanitation workers went on strike April 3 against Waste Management Inc., a private trash-hauling company based in Houston, Texas. The workers, members of Local 813 of the Teamsters union, say that the major issues that sparked the walkout are health benefits and overtime pay. According to a union spokesman, the company wants to charge each worker \$305 per month for health benefits and has not contributed to their medical plan since December 31 of last year. The company is also demanding that the workers lose time-and-a-half pay for working on Saturdays. One worker has estimated that the cost of health benefits and the reduction of overtime pay could easily result in him losing around \$7,000 a year.

The union also says that the company made nearly a billion dollars in 2004 and could afford giving the workers a decent settlement. The workers had been without a new contract since November 30, 2005. The last strike against a private garbage-hauling company took place in New York in 1990.

Waste Management collects trash for about 10,000 commercial businesses, such as offices, hotels, and restaurants

in New York City and parts of Westchester County. Two of their clients are Shea Stadium and Yankee Stadium where the New York Mets and New York Yankees play baseball.

Mayor Bloomberg has declared: "If Waste management doesn't collect the trash ... the city will step in and we will... pick up the trash." However, a company spokesman has claimed that they are using scab labor to pick up the garbage.

Canada

Diamond mineworkers strike

About 400 workers at Ekati in the Northwest Territories, Canada's first diamond mine, went on strike on April 7. Negotiations between their union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), and representatives of the mine's owner, BHP Billiton, broke off the day before. The company had offered a salary increase of 1 percent and one-day floating holiday in exchange for workers giving up three days of paid sick leave, but their offer did not address key issues of layoffs by seniority and job security.

Ekati, which is located on Lac de Gras, 300 km northeast of Yellowknife and 200 km south of the Arctic Circle, opened in 1998. It produces 6 percent of the world's diamond supply by value or 4 percent by weight and yields 3 to 5 million karats annually. BHP Billiton is the world's largest mining company, based in Australia. It was formed in a 2001 merger of Australian Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) and British company Billiton.

Workers at Winnipeg bus manufacturer walk out

Six hundred sixty-seven employees of New Flyer Industries in Winnipeg, Manitoba, walked out on April 5 after the company bargaining team demanded the union agree to all its non-monetary proposals before discussing monetary issues. The main issue is the contracting out of work: New Flyer is planning to transfer some operations out of the Winnipeg headquarters to its Minnesota factories in St. Cloud and Crookston, "which are currently operating below capacity," according to a company representative.

The workers are members of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 3003. Their contract expired at the end of March. New Flyer is the largest heavy-duty transit bus manufacturer in North America and produces about 1,500 buses a year.



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