

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 April 2006

Latin America

Sugar workers strike in Jamaica

Over 4,000 workers walked off their jobs April 10 at the Frome, Monymusk and Dukenfield sugar plantations in Jamaica. The weeklong strike was part of a campaign for higher wages and better working conditions. All three plantations are property of the state-owned Jamaica Sugar Company.

The workers returned to work after the companies promised to improve conditions. Jamaica's labor minister, Roger Clarke, who brokered the tentative agreement, said workers would be guaranteed improved wages and working conditions if they returned to work.

Jamaica's sugar harvest normally ends in July, but this year it has been delayed by both strikes and a series of storms.

Transit workers strike in Buenos Aires

Employees of Metrovias, which operates Buenos Aires metro subway trains, walked out last week in solidarity with demands by 200 security guards employed by a subcontractor to be included in the transit workers contract. The workers are members of the Motorized Rail Union (UTA).

The strike took place despite UTA leaders' rejection of the guards' demands. The walkout began on Tuesday April 11 when militant workers took over sections of the train tracks. Federal police violently assaulted and evicted the protesters on Wednesday. The strikers agreed to end the job action on Thursday, but threatened to walk out again if the guards' demands are not addressed.

Wages stagnate in Argentina

Despite three years of record GDP growth, workers' wages in Argentina lag behind 1998 levels, according to a report in *Pagina 12*, a Buenos Aires daily. The GDP in 2005 was 5.8 percent higher than in 1998, the year before the country's financial implosion, but real wages have yet to reach 1998 levels.

In 1998 a typical household with two wage earners

earned 1,146 pesos (US\$1,146), 11 percent below the 1,292 peso "family breadbasket" necessary for a decent life. The "breadbasket" is an estimate of what an average middle class family buys each month. By December 2005, the typical wage had risen to 1,564 pesos (US\$520) while the "basket" had increased to 2,207 pesos, a gap of 30 percent.

The study, commissioned by the CTA, one of the country's labor federations, indicates that if one factors in conditions of rising job insecurity, the gap is even worse. "Acquiring the 'family breadbasket,' is a very remote possibility for more than 60 percent of working families working under conditions of job insecurity," says the report.

While GDP has increased 24.5 percent since the low point of Argentina's depression in January 2002, and per worker productivity is up 12.4 percent, real wages have only increased 0.4 percent. The bulk of the GDP has been pocketed by the capitalist class and corporate profits maintained through the stagnation of real wages.

As an example, the report points out that while wages in Argentina's 1,000 biggest firms average 2,379 pesos, rising productivity would permit wages of 9,280 pesos, given their high rate of profitability.

United States

Walkout at Kansas packinghouse over reprisal threat

Some 600 workers at Excel's meatpacking plant in Dodge City, Kansas left the processing lines and occupied the plant's cafeteria April 11 to protest company reprisals against workers who attended the previous day's rally against anti-immigrant legislation proposed by Congress. Excel's security director responded to the wildcat action by calling the Ford County Sheriff's office, which dispatched three officers while dozens of state troopers were also brought to the site.

Excel spokesman Mark Klein refused to disclose to the media whether it had imposed the sanctions due to

the workers' attendance at the immigration rally, although he admitted the absences had caused a slowdown in production.

After several hours of negotiations with the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 2, the company said it would not discipline workers. Several meatpacking plants either shut down production lines or closed entirely as a result of the April 10 immigration rallies.

Hospital workers rally as Pennsylvania facility shuts

Hospital workers and their supporters staged a final rally April 12 as the Philipsburg Area Hospital in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania closed down. Hospital management gave workers a 48-hour notice that the facility would be shuttered.

The hospital's CEO evoked deep anger among workers when he blamed the closure on their refusal to give sufficient concessions. Philipsburg filed for bankruptcy in January. Low medical care reimbursements, rising costs and difficulty recruiting doctors played a role in bringing the institution down.

Coroner's report cites link between death and Ground Zero contamination

An autopsy report released last week claims there was a link between the death of a New York detective and the hazardous air around the site of the collapse of the Twin Towers in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Some 7,300 people who worked at the site have united in a class-action lawsuit against their employers seeking damages as a result of exposure to contaminants.

"It is felt with a reasonable degree of medical certainty that the cause of death in this case was directly related to the 9/11 incident," said the medical examiner's office in Ocean County, New Jersey.

James Zagroda, who logged 450 hours working on recovery efforts at Ground Zero, did not smoke or have any past case of asthma. His family believes his exposure to a "toxic brew of chemicals" scarred his lungs. Within weeks he developed a cough and he had to use an oxygen tank to breathe.

Dr. Gerard Breton, the 73-year-old retired pathologist who performed the autopsy, told the *New York Times*, "I cannot personally understand that anyone could see what I saw in the lungs, and know that the person was exposed to Ground Zero, and not make the same link I made."

Ottawa Congress Centre workers walk out

About 200 employees of the Ottawa Congress Centre went on strike on April 13 after rejecting their employer's last offer by a margin of over 60 percent. The proposal included a salary raise of 3 percent each year for the next three years. The union insisted this was insufficient because the Congress Centre workers' wages are 20 and 30 percent lower than those of other workers in Ottawa's service industry.

The strikers, who include food service staff, dishwashers, engineer and maintenance staff, are represented by the United Steelworkers of America Local 8327-24. They voted 93 percent in favor of strike authorization in late March.

Mississauga support workers strike

Support workers at Community Living Mississauga (CLM) went on strike on April 10. Main issues in the dispute are fairness for part-timers and a reasonable wage increase—about two-thirds of the 360 workers are employed part-time, with no benefits and earning less than \$15 an hour. The strike is affecting about 1,500 people with developmental disabilities in Mississauga and Brampton. CLM has shut down its day programs and is using managers and scabs to run its group homes and apartments, which serve 200 people with developmental disabilities.

The striking support workers are members of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). This is their first strike in the 26 years since becoming unionized.



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