

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 May 2006

Latin America

May Day march in Mexico City

Two hundred thousand workers marched and rallied in Mexico City's Plaza Constitución on May 1, International Workers Day. Demonstrators denounced President Vicente Fox and his National Action Party (PAN.) Addressing Fox, workers chanted, "*No ve ni oye a los trabajadores*"—"he does not hear and does not see the workers."

Fox is blamed for declining real wages, increasing unemployment and the destruction of steady jobs and their replacement with temporary employment at lower pay. Marchers also held signs condemning the repression and murder of striking workers and calling for an investigation into the deaths of two metal workers at the Sicartsa steel mill in Michoacan State. Many placards called for a national strike against the Fox government.

The National Front for Labor Autonomy and the Mexican Trade Union Front led the protest, which included representatives of over 400 Mexican unions. At the rally speakers called for the removal of Mexico's labor minister, who was directly responsible for the government's intervention in the miners union that resulted in the replacement of union president Napoleon Gomez by Elias Morales.

Report on child labor in Argentina

Results released last week from the Children's and Adolescents' Activities Survey (EANNA) commissioned by Argentina's Labor Ministry indicate that 7 percent of children under the age of 13 and 20 percent of adolescents under the age of 17 are forced to work for a living in Argentina.

Most child workers are boys and mostly work in construction, manufacturing and agriculture; girls work as domestic employees, and in childcare and food preparation. According to the survey, 25 percent of child and adolescent workers do not attend school.

Massive protest by Chilean secondary school

students

Thousands of high school students marched in downtown Santiago on May 4 demanding bus passes for students. Four hundred and eleven students were arrested after clashing with the police. The students intended to rally at the Education Ministry building to protest delays in the issuance of passes that give students the right to discounts in the city's transit system, but they were barred by the police.

Student mobilizations began on April 26. In addition to the transportation vouchers, students are demanding university entrance exams be free of cost and that the mandatory school day (currently nine hours) be shortened.

University of Buenos Aires students and professors protest election of university president

Students at the state-owned University of Buenos Aires, supported by many of their professors, rallied at the Department of Economics building to protest the nomination of Atilio Alterini for the presidency of the university on the grounds that Alterini was part of the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 through 1982.

A confrontation ensued when the students broke through the chained gates leading into the building and clashed with security guards and others. Following the confrontation, the students and professors marched to the Education Ministry in downtown Buenos Aires, demanding that Alterini's name be taken off the list of possible candidates.

United States

Federal government blocks publication of information bulletin on asbestos

The *Baltimore Sun* reported last week that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) killed the publication in the fall of 2005 of a five-page information bulletin on the dangers of asbestos in brakes, calling it "not warranted."

Most US automakers stopped installing brakes with

asbestos in the 1990s due to the danger that inhalation of the tiny fibers could cause deadly diseases such as mesothelioma, lung cancer or asbestosis. But an official from the US Geological Survey who tracks data on imported minerals claims there has been an 83 percent increase in the importation of asbestos brakes over the last 10 years.

Auto mechanics, whether young or old, are not aware of the new situation and the threat to their health from these imports, which is what led to the preparation of the Safety and Health Information Bulletin by OSHA's Directorate of Science, Technology and Medicine. The United States remains one of the few industrialized countries that has not banned the use or importation of asbestos products.

Minnesota nursing home workers strike

Over 100 nursing home workers went on strike May 5 against the Guardian Angels Health and Rehabilitation Center in Hibbing, Minnesota, over forced overtime, job security, health insurance, safety and other concession demands. According to United Steelworkers Local 9349, which represents the workers, management implemented a contract rejected by the union and has brought in replacement workers.

A major concern for workers is forced overtime that has impacted family life as well as led to fatigue and the threat of injuries on the job. A spokesperson for the company has said, "Overtime is unavoidable."

The contract for Local 9349 expired on December 31, 2005. The two sides have held about 11 negotiating sessions. No new talks are scheduled.

Three Florida construction workers die in building collapse

Three Florida construction workers were killed and a fourth injured when the roof of a condominium collapsed and buried them. The workers were atop the roof of the 26-story luxury condominium project in Bal Harbour when the wooden frame that was supporting recently poured concrete collapsed and engulfed the workers.

Among the dead were Edny Guirand, originally from Haiti, and Torivio Acevedo Trejo from Queretaro, Mexico. Names of the third victim and the injured worker were not available.

The main contractor for the project is Boran Craig Barber Engel Construction Inc. The accident follows quickly on the heels of the death of another

construction worker, Jesse Morris, who fell to his death from the MarinaBlue project in downtown Miami.

Canada

Strike at Ontario auto parts plant

On May 2 unionized employees of Autrans Corporation in Ingersoll, 40 kilometers east on London, went on strike. Autrans manufactures auto parts for Cami Automotive, a joint venture automobile producer with ownership split 50-50 between Suzuki and General Motors. The main issue in the dispute is wages, with Autrans offering a raise of \$2.50 an hour over the next two-and-a-half years, and the union—the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)—requesting \$3 over a three-year deal. The workers' current hourly wage is around \$17.

While only 250 workers are involved in the strike, the walkout is having a wide impact because Cami has no stockpile of parts due to its system of just-in-time delivery. So far the action has idled 2,300 hourly workers at Cami as well as an estimated 14,000 employees at Cami suppliers.



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