

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 May 2006

Latin America

More than 100,000 high school students walk out in Chile

Over 100,000 secondary school students are on strike in Chile. The students are demanding that the Socialist Party government of President Michelle Bachelet provide free bus passes, free university entrance exams and a shorter school day. Industrial and technical students are also demanding paid internships—currently students are assigned to perform unpaid labor to industrial establishments—and the right to join trade unions.

The walkout began over a week ago at two Santiago high schools and quickly spread across Chile's industrial, technical and other high schools. On Friday, May 26, over 1,000 schools were shut down across Chile, with more students expected to join the walkout this Tuesday if negotiations fail to produce an agreement with the Bachelet government.

President Bachelet initially denounced the students and refused to negotiate with them, accusing them of “wanting to negotiate, while kicking under the table,” a reference to alleged acts of violence at a student demonstration. Student leaders insist that agents provocateurs incited the acts that provided an excuse for the police repression.

The Metropolitan Professors Union (CMP) announced that it supports the students and that secondary school teachers will strike this Tuesday in solidarity with the students. CMP members point out that since the school day was lengthened in an earlier school reform, teachers' incomes have fallen because teachers can no longer take on additional classes at other schools.

Public employees set date for general strike in Costa Rica

Government employees are to strike June 7 and 8 against the government of President Oscar Arias. At issue is a Supreme Court decision striking down benefits negotiated between public employee unions and the government. The strike will also protest a proposed free trade treaty with the United States.

Last week Costa Rica's Supreme Court removed a series of benefits from public employee contracts. In response to the attack on their contractual rights, public employee unions

agreed to launch a national strike.

Employees of the government-owned Electric Utility (ICE) will join the public employees. ICE workers fear that the free trade agreement with the United States will lead to their company's privatization.

This will be the first national strike by public employees against the Arias administration.

Strike at Colombia's second-largest coal mine

On May 22, miners walked off their jobs at Colombia's second largest coal mine owned by Drummond, a US-based firm, after rejecting a company wage offer. The 3,570 miners are demanding a 20 percent pay increase while management offered a 7 percent raise.

At issue are working conditions and improvements in quality of life. Workers are demanding the building by the company of several cafeterias for children, the elderly and the incapacitated and the establishment of a clinic to treat alcoholism.

Miners at Drummond typically work 12 hours a day under unsanitary conditions. Hundreds of former miners in the region are incapacitated by black lung disease caused by years of breathing carbon coal dust.

Joaquin Romero, president of the United Federation of Energy Workers (FUTSE), indicated that the cost to the company if it met all the strikers' demands would be US\$100 million. This is a paltry amount compared to the company's revenues from the mine, which this year is expected to produce 28 million tons of coal valued at US\$65 per ton.

A week earlier 3,500 workers at another important coal mine owned by Glencore, a Swiss firm, also went on strike over wages and working conditions.

Drummond management warned of the impact the strike is having on the Colombian economy. The two mines produce 40 percent of the nation's coal. Colombian law allows the government to impose arbitration after 60 days.

United States

Immigrant roofer dies in fall

An Hispanic immigrant working as a roofer in Middletown, Connecticut, died May 22 after falling off a roof 30 feet to the ground. For 30 minutes co-workers, likewise immigrants, tried to aid the victim before neighbors

called 911. When police arrived, the co-workers fled. Three detained workers were turned over to immigration authorities when they did not produce identification.

Critics of federal immigration policy said the 30-minute delay in calling emergency services, likely due to the general climate of fear immigrant workers face, could have been a factor in the death.

EPA said to pressure scientists to skip pesticide tests

Three unions representing federal workers accused the Environmental Protection Agency of acting in league with the pesticide industry by pressuring scientists and specialists to skip tests of certain pesticides that might be harmful to children.

The American Federation of Government Employees, the National Treasury Employees Union, and the Engineers and Scientists of California, which together represent 9,000 EPA workers, joined forces in lodging the complaint.

Michigan nurses fired after filing complaints against nursing home operator

Two nurses in Kalamazoo, Michigan, were fired one week after filing confidential complaints charging their employer, Metron Integrated Health Systems, with providing inadequate care for residents of its nursing home. The nurses claimed that because of short staffing, residents did not receive medications on time and nurses were being compelled to perform procedures for which they were not qualified.

Eight former employees at Metron's Big Rapids nursing home face criminal charges for negligence and for covering up the January 2005 death of a resident. The Michigan attorney general also filed charges against three of Metron's nursing homes, claiming they committed fraud by collecting Medicaid payments under conditions where they did not meet minimum standards for staffing.

Flight attendant union embarrassed by executive praise

The union representing flight attendants at American Airlines has called on the carrier's chief executive, Gerard Arpey, and other management officials to halt the airline's public exposure of the union's collaboration with corporate leadership in finding cost-savings at the airlines.

At town hall-style meetings in major cities where the company has bases, executives have praised the Association of Professional Flight Attendants for their participation in the PLI (performance leadership initiative), which in part helped the airline save \$8 million since 2001 and restore profitability.

The APFA felt compelled to pull out of the program earlier this year when the airline awarded bonuses to management that ranged as high as \$1 million to senior executives. The union had been aware of the bonus incentive for managers while participating in the PLI program.

Canada

Wildcat strike at Ontario auto parts supplier

About 250 workers at the auto parts supplier AGS Automotive Systems Inc. in Oshawa east, 50 kilometers east of Toronto, went on a wildcat strike May 19. The strike at AGS, which supplies bumpers to General Motors, ended after six days. The deal was ratified by a 97 percent margin among skilled trades workers and 92 percent among the production team.

The new contract includes only a 20-cent-per-hour wage increase. Workers said the strike was not about wages, but unacceptable concession demands by the employer, including changing the previous pension agreements. These concessions were recently imposed on workers at other AGS plants and the Oshawa workers insist that the strike was the only way to secure the pension agreement.

Tensions were high in the strike, with GM threatening to remove key dies from the Oshawa plant if the dispute was not resolved within a few days. Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) national leader Buzz Hargrove did not offer any support to the striking workers, calling the action a "powder keg" that could potentially bankrupt the parts company and cause the loss of hundreds of jobs.

A local union leader said he was disillusioned with the actions of the national CAW: "It's one thing for the union to make all their policies. But if they don't have the balls, the backbone, or the guts to back them up, then what's the point?"

Government high-tech workers threaten strike

About 12,000 computer experts across Canada, represented by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, are threatening to strike. The federal government's Treasury Board has offered a wage increase of 4 percent in a three-year deal, while the union is seeking twice that amount.

Besides wages, the main sticking point is recruitment and retention allowances, bonuses paid by management to encourage workers not to leave for better-paid jobs in the private sector. The last contract expired 18 months ago. If the scheduled reconciliation board hearing does not resolve the issue, the workers may go on strike in late June.



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