

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 June 2006

## Latin America

### Chilean secondary school students continue strike

A national strike by 600,000 Chilean high school students to demand improved schools, elimination of fees for college entrance exams and free bus transportation is continuing. The walkout and school occupations that began May 29 have won broad support from parents, teachers and other working people. Over a half million students and supporters rallied in Santiago on June 1.

Chile's newly elected President Michelle Bachelet promised to introduce "reforms" in high schools, but has adamantly opposed the students' demands for free buses and university admission for all students. Student leaders point out that Chile's treasury is in surplus due to an explosion in the price of copper, one of Chile's principal export products, and they insist a portion of the additional revenues be allocated to the high schools.

This is the first major crisis faced by President Bachelet since she assumed power 12 weeks ago. Anxious not to appear as "giving in" to student demands, the government's position is that no further negotiations will take place; Bachelet's proposals will go forward as she presented them.

On Saturday morning student leaders announced that they will not accept any agreement that does not include free bus passes and called on all workers to join them in a national strike June 5.

### Transit workers to strike in northern Argentina

The Union of Surface Transportation (UTA) that represents bus drivers in the northwestern city of Tucumán announced that it will launch a 48-hour strike June 8 as part of a campaign for higher wages. On June 3, the bus drivers walked out for 24-hours. Drivers from Tucumán's three bus systems—urban, interurban and rural—participated. The bus drivers are demanding a 16 percent wage increase to 500 pesos a month. This is more than double management's offer of 200 pesos.

### National strike set in Costa Rica

Costa Rican unions announced a national strike for June 9 to protest the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. The agreement, CAFTA, threatens labor rights, by reducing them to the levels of other Central American countries. Costa Rica is the only nation that has not ratified the

agreement, which would apply to all of Central America, the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Union leaders point out that the Costa Rican Supreme Court has already nullified measures that would have protected public employees from some of the conditions that the agreement would impose. Among the clauses that the unions reject is one that allows employers to form employer associations, political and economic cartels to impose changes in working conditions and obtain government concessions.

### Mexican copper miners begin four-day strike

On June 1 miners at the Cananea Copper Mine in northern Mexico walked off their jobs to protest management's decision to force them to work on the 100th anniversary of the historic and bloody 1906 strike at the mine. That struggle was one of a series of bitter labor battles—demanding an eight-hour-day and decent wages—that contributed to the upheavals of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The Cananea mine is owned by the industrial conglomerate Grupo Mexico, which also owns the the Pasta de Conchos mine in Cahuila, where 65 coal miners were killed in a methane gas explosion February 19.

The 1,500 striking Cananea miners said they wanted to solidarize themselves with the struggle of their comrades at La Caridad mine, also owned by Grupo Mexico. Those miners have been on strike for over two months, over a dispute over safety, working conditions and government intervention in their union's affairs.

Also on strike are the metal workers employed at the Siderts foundry in Lazaro Cardenas, which is now occupied by the police. Two young workers were shot and killed by police in April when security forces assaulted the plant. Carlos Abascal, governance secretary of the administration of Vicente Fox, denounced the strikers last week, charging them with "extortion" and claiming their strike was illegal.

### Brazilian autoworkers launch one-day strike at Volkswagen

Over 20,000 workers at two VW plants in Sao Paulo and another plant in Parana State carried out a 24-hour strike on May 31 to protest layoffs. The workers say management is planning to sack 6,000 workers. VW management has not indicated an exact figure, but admits that thousands of

workers will be laid off to achieve a 25 percent cut in labor costs. VW is Brazil's largest auto manufacturer.

### **United States**

#### **New Jersey Democrats call for attacks on state workers**

Three Democrats in the New Jersey state legislature called on Governor Jon Corzine to slash state workers' pay and benefits in an effort to relieve the state's budget problems. At a press conference, Senator Stephen Sweeney, Assemblymen Jerry Green and Paul Moriarty declared they wanted to introduce workers to the "real world."

"We have to shrink the government, instead of continuing to expand it," said Moriarty. "We have to go on a diet. We have to call in Jenny Craig and NutriSystem, and we got to put this government on a diet."

Their proposal calls for a 40-hour work week to replace the current 35 hours; an end to the buyback of unused sick time; raising the retirement age from 55 to 60; no pension or health benefits for part-timers; and mandatory employee contributions for benefits.

#### **Hospital fires activist nurse**

Exempla Healthcare fired a nurse who recently lobbied the Colorado legislature for healthcare reforms. Barb Hostrup, a veteran nurse of 19 years who worked at St. Joseph Hospital in Denver, called for legislation to compel hospitals to report nurse-to-patient ratios, hospital-acquired infections, whistleblower protection, and a measure that would mandate that large companies provide health care to employees.

Hostrup said she had been tipped off by fellow workers that the company was soliciting co-workers to file complaints against her. One complaint against her was for rudeness and another for mistreating a patient. Hostrup says throughout her career she has never been disciplined or had a bad performance review.

A February 2005 review paid tribute to Hostrup declaring, "Barb always shows kindness and respect towards patients, families and co-workers." In April of this year, a picture of Hostrup was published in Exempla's employee newsletter noting she had recently completed a program that certified her as a nurse trainer and "clinical scholar".

#### **St. Louis bricklayers strike**

Some 1,200 St. Louis bricklayers went on strike June 1 after union negotiators and the area's Mason Contractors Association failed to reach a new agreement. Neither side will divulge the issues preventing an agreement.

Bricklayers Local 1, which represents striking workers, has declined to order picketing of construction sites. "We're thankful there are no pickets, so work can go on," said Dennis Lavalley, president of the St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers.

### **Canada**

#### **Toronto transit workers stage a one-day wildcat strike**

At midnight on May 28, about 8,500 employees of Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) went on a wildcat strike halting bus and subway operation across the city Monday morning. The action was taken following several months of acrimonious negotiations over the safety of drivers, health premiums, job evaluations and the move by the TTC to force cleaning crews and employees who maintain the tracks to switch to night shifts. The workers ended the strike after the Ontario Labour Board issued a second cease-and-desist order mid-afternoon.

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) President Bob Kinnear said the problems that led to the strike remain. "It is unjust that TTC management can repeatedly violate our contract, ignore arbitration awards, even ignore court orders and get away with it. But when our members take action on our behalf because management ignores the formal grievance process, we're acting 'illegally'. The labour laws in this province are clearly stacked against workers."

A supplementary issue which workers have faced came to a head only four days before the strike when the union advised its members to "no longer engage in fare disputes with customers" in order to avoid assaults, which have become more frequent.

It remains unclear what actions the city will take against the union and workers who participated in the action, but it has been suggested that they will be subject to stiff fines and possibly even jail sentences for the union leadership.



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