

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 June 2006

Latin America

200,000 teachers march in Oaxaca

Over 200,000 teachers and their supporters marched through the streets of Oaxaca, capital of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, in support of 70,000 teachers whose wages, benefits and working conditions are being threatened by the administration of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. Members of other unions, peasant organizations and students from the Autonomous University of Oaxaca joined the protest which began at 4 p.m. on June 16 and lasted four hours. Along the route of the march people came out of their homes and shops to applaud. Heavy rain did not dampen the energy and spirit of the demonstrators.

That evening at a rally in El Llano Plaza in downtown Oaxaca, speakers categorized Ulises Ruiz's strategy as repressive and called for the strengthening of this "great popular movement." The teachers are demanding Ruiz's resignation as a precondition for any negotiated settlement and are circulating a petition demanding the governor's recall.

At dawn on June 14, 2,000 police forcibly expelled 10,000 striking teachers occupying the Zocalo square in downtown Oaxaca. Twenty people, among them three children, were wounded and 40 arrested in this operation. Union leaders reported that four people were killed, including a child, and that the government removed their bodies.

While teachers regrouped in other parts of the city, the police burned their tents. Another battle ensued before the security forces retreated.

Traditionally teachers have camped out in the Zocalo during contract negotiations to press for an agreement. The four-week strike has created a financial emergency for teachers' families. Thousands of Oaxacan citizens have responded to teachers' appeals with bags of beans, corn tortillas and oil for the workers' soup kitchens.

Friday's mass mobilization was the third in two

weeks and also the largest. One hundred thousand marched June 7.

The federal government, headed by President Vicente Fox, declared that there would be no federal monies for the Oaxaca teachers. While the Mexican economy and government coffers have benefited from rising oil prices, none of that has reached the people of Oaxaca, one of the most impoverished states in Mexico.

Teachers also mobilized in three cities in the southern state of Chiapas in repudiation of draft legislation introduced by Chiapas Governor Pablo Salazar that would severely limit bargaining rights by public employees by making it possible for small groups of workers to negotiate separate contracts from the union. The legislation would also make it easier for the government to fire public employees

Mexican unions threaten national strike against government interference in miners' union

Unions representing 4 million Mexican workers, including miners, communication workers and university employees, threatened last Friday to launch a national strike on June 28, only four days before Mexico's presidential elections.

Other unions are divided on this job action. Some, including the powerful electrical workers, are debating whether to join the strike. Others, such as the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM), with strong ties to former ruling party, PRI, have rejected it out of hand. A recent press release states that the purpose of the strike is to press the government not to intervene in internal union affairs. More specifically, the statement demands that the government recognize Napoleón Gómez Urrutia as head of the Miners and Metalworkers Union. Gómez is widely recognized as a corrupt union bureaucrat. Labor Ministry authorities used this fact to remove him from power and install a rival of his from within the union's bureaucracy, disregarding the wishes of the membership.

Nicaraguan public health workers threaten to

strike

Last Wednesday, the Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD) threatened to strike if the government annuls a contract signed in April that ended a five-month-long strike. Among the clauses that the government of President Enrique Bolaños is ignoring are incentive payments, overtime and travel expenses for public health doctors and nurses.

FETSALUD officials also charged that hospital wards are still being privatized, in violation of April's agreement.

United States

Janitors protest against paycheck scam in Texas

Some 100 janitors held a march and demonstration in downtown Houston, Texas against a pay scam perpetrated by Professional Janitorial Services. The march followed the initiation of a lawsuit that charges the company with violating the Fair Labor Standards Act by withholding 30 minutes a week from their paychecks.

"They told us they do that because those are the rules," one janitor told the AP. Workers also charge that the company issues the first paycheck after one month and that it only includes two weeks of wages with the balance to be paid when they terminate their employment. When workers quit, however, they are told that the balance was paid at an earlier date.

California hospital workers protest as contract expiration nears

Medical workers staged a noontime rally June 14 at the Community Hospital in Riverside, California to protest staffing levels and unsafe working conditions. "Every night we are expected to decide which patient is the most critical," said one demonstrator.

The United Healthcare Workers section of the Service Employees International Union has a series of scheduled talks with Riverside Community Hospital that are set to take up staffing issues before the contract expires on June 30. Workers are also pressing to receive job security and funding for education and job training.

North Carolina meatpacker won't challenge labor board ruling

Smithfield Foods says it will not appeal a National Labor Relations Board ruling that found the company guilty of using intimidation and threats against workers trying to unionize its giant hog processing plant in Tar

Heel, North Carolina. The NLRB ordered Smithfield to rehire 10 workers that it fired, including one who was beaten by thugs employed by the company's private security force.

The May ruling charged the company with "intense and widespread coercion," including tactics such as bullying, confiscation of union literature, spying on pro-union workers and threats to freeze wages. Smithfield denied the allegations, while not appealing them, and said it will prepare a new "information" campaign against future attempts by the United Food and Commercial Workers to organize the plant.



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