

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 July 2006

Latin America

Panamanian teachers threaten to strike

The Education Action Front (FAM), representing independent teachers, and the Association of Professors of the Republic (APR) rejected a government proposal to raise monthly wages by US\$65 over three years. The teachers have threatened to strike July 11 unless the government makes a better wage offer.

The government proposal calls for a US\$50 increase next year \$15 in 2008, an increase which, according to teachers, is well below current inflation rates. They are demanding a US\$190 raise.

Guatemala public health doctors on strike

A strike by public health doctors in Guatemala is entering its third week. The doctors are demanding higher wages and an increase in hospital budgets for medicine.

Last week the government pledged to increase the budget for medicine, promising not to allow further shortages. It also created an emergency temporary bonus equivalent to 25 percent of wages in an attempt to induce doctors to end their walkout. The money for the bonus would run out in October.

Sergio Morales, the Human Rights Solicitor, denounced the lack of medicine in 37 public hospitals and the fact that outpatient clients do not get free medicine when they leave the country. He also pointed out that Guatemala's budget for health care, 1.4 percent of its gross domestic product, is the lowest in Central America and is a violation of the country's constitution, which guarantees basic health services for all.

Doctors have vowed to stay out until legislation is passed guaranteeing the government subsidy and until their wage increase is made permanent.

Grupo Mexico to shut down Caridad mine unless workers end job action

Grupo Mexico threatened last week to shut down its largest copper mine—La Caridad in the Mexican state of

Sonora—unless strikers return to work. The workers walked off their jobs March 24 demanding safer working conditions and an end to the government's interference in their union. They are occupying the mine. A closure of the mine would destroy 2,000 jobs.

Even if the mine closes, picketing is expected to continue. The Mexican police have indicated that an assault to expel the workers from the mine could result in numerous casualties.

A strike by 271 metal workers at the Sicartsa steel mill in Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan state, is now 100 days old. Last April, a police and army operation to end the strike and occupation of the mill killed two workers.

United States

Detroit city union surrenders to concessions

The administration of Detroit Democratic Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick will slash hours, pay and benefits for 4,000 of the city's workers following the endorsement of the cuts by a state-appointed panel. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers Council 25 bowed to the concessions, claiming that opposition would have provoked even harsher measures.

The union says it will not put the agreement to a vote by rank and file, citing the authority of the mayor to impose the settlement. "We don't have any choice right now," said chief AFSCME negotiator Jimmy Hearn. The agreement cuts hours and pay by 10 percent and increases costs for prescriptions and doctor visits.

Iowa nurses strike

Nurses at Dubuque, Iowa's Finley Hospital launched a three-day strike July 6 after hospital management rejected a mediator's request for talks. The contract between the hospital and Service Employees International Union Local 199, which represents Finley's 333 nurses, expired in June and bogged down over a number of issues, including wages and staffing.

Local 199 was seeking a 5.75 percent wage increase while the hospital was only willing to offer 3 percent. Management brought in professional strikebreakers and plans to lock out nurses for an additional two days after the strike comes to an end.

Finley is a part of Iowa Health System, the state's largest healthcare provider, and controls three of Des Moines' five commercial hospitals, none of which are unionized. Finley was first unionized by the SEIU in 2003 and obtained a one-year contract in 2005.

Workers strike Oregon public utility

About 155 workers at Eugene, Oregon's public utility struck July 6 over healthcare and other issues after the Eugene Water & Electric Board refused arbitration. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 659, which represents construction workers, electrical line technicians and hydroelectric plant workers, is seeking lower out-of-pocket healthcare costs, an additional paid holiday and retroactive raises to cover the six months they have worked without a contract.

The Eugene Water & Electric Board is offering raises of 12.4 percent over the course of a three-year agreement but has refused to budge on healthcare issues. The strike is the first ever in the 95-year existence of the public utility.



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