

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 September 2006

Latin America

Military police confront sugar cane strikers in Brazil

On September 15, military police were mobilized in an attempt to prevent striking sugar cane workers from blocking the highway leading to the city of Andradina, on the border between the states of Sao Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul.

Twelve-hundred sugar cane cutters and sugar mill workers went on strike on September 11 demanding an increase in wages. The strikers managed to block the cultivation and harvesting of sugar cane. Last week, the strikers also tried to shut down a sugar mill owned by the Cosan Group. Cosan, one of the wealthiest and most influential companies in the sugar sector, owns 17 mills that process R\$2.5 billion worth of sugar cane each year. Mill management obtained a court order enjoining the strikers from entering company property and from blocking buses that bring in strikebreakers to the mill.

Strikers are demanding a monthly wage of R\$401, which is typical for other mills in the area.

Protest against privatization of electricity and phones in Costa Rica

Costa Rican trade unions and social organizations intend to launch a general strike on October 23 and 24 to protest the Central American Free Trade Treaty with the United States and the privatization of the nation's electrical utility and communications company, both part of a state monopoly—the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity (ICE). On September 15, Costa Rica's Independence Day, the protesters mobilized across the country to publicize their opposition to the trade treaty.

President Oscar Arias accepted last week the resignation of ICE President Jorge Gutierrez and replaced him with Pedro Pablo Quiroz, a consultant for privately-owned communications transnational firms. The move is widely seen as paving the way for ICE's breakup and sale to foreign transnationals.

President Arias is an outspoken supporter of selling the national industries to private firms, in the name of “modernization.”

The organizers of October's general strike also oppose a free trade treaty with the United States favored by Arias that still has to be approved by the nation's legislature. Costa Rica is the only Central American nation that has yet to ratify the trade treaty.

Teachers end strike in Panama

The Teachers' Action Front (FAM) announced on September 14 the end of a 26-day teachers' strike over wages. The FAM teachers had walked out behind the demand for a US\$190 increase in their monthly wages, \$100 more than the government's offer to other teachers' unions. As the strike went on the FAM officials reduced the demand to \$120. It has now agreed to \$90. The increase is to take place in steps and be fully implemented by 2010. The government did agree to operate an occupational health service and to conduct a study on life insurance coverage and risks for educators.

Medical crisis continues in Guatemala

Guatemalan President Oscar Berger Perdomo announced last week that work has started on the reactivation of medical services at the Roosevelt Hospital in Guatemala City. The Roosevelt hospital, together with the San Juan de Dios hospital, was shut down this month due to lack of essential supplies. The two institutions are Guatemala's largest public hospitals and have been at the heart of a three-month-long protest by public health doctors demanding more money for equipment and supplies. The striking public health doctors have suspended outpatient services.

In addition to supplies, the doctors demand a higher budget for all medical services and a medical statute to regulate wages in public health. Currently Guatemala has 6,000 hospital beds in 44 hospitals, an insufficient number to meet the needs of the working classes and poor.

United States

California port ship occupation ends with compromise wage settlement

Eighteen Filipino seamen agreed to end their four-day strike over back pay September 11 aboard the ship *Endless*, which had been docked at California's Port of Long Beach, following a negotiated settlement.

The strike began after an inspection of the ship's books by the International Transport Workers Federation found that the sailors were due \$300,000 in back pay. The ship's crew then refused to work until the issue was corrected. News of the violation spread to dockworkers that were tasked to load the ship with petroleum coke but refused to do so, causing a backup.

Details of the settlement were not released but are believed to consist of a "compromise" cash settlement.

Civil rights suit filed against Hawaiian hotel used by US Army

A hotel workers' union local has filed a civil rights lawsuit in US District Court against managers and security guards of the Hale Koa hotel located on Waikiki Beach on the island of Honolulu. Four members of Unite Here Local 5 charge they were threatened while demonstrating and handing out leaflets on the sidewalk outside the hotel where workers voted to unionize in April.

The union contends the "sidewalks are clearly part of the Waikiki transportation grid." It is seeking damages in excess of \$75,000 for injuries sustained by union representatives and hotel workers.

The Hale Koa is used by the US Army as a rest and relaxation facility. The suit says in part, "Defendants are agents of the United States Government and are clothed with its authority, including its coercive power."

Bush administration scraps Equal Opportunity Survey

The Bush administration has moved to end the Labor Department's annual Equal Opportunity Survey, which had been implemented to identify federal contractors most likely to engage in systematic discrimination against women and minority workers.

The survey was one of the measures put in place before the Clinton administration left office and initially sent out surveys to 50,000 of the 100,000 federal contractors. The Bush administration first moved to reduce the number of surveys to 10,000. The

latest decision will permanently end the survey altogether. Bush representatives in the Labor Department justified the decision on the grounds that the survey did not work.

24-hour strike by janitors at Indiana malls

Janitors at the Fashion Mall and Circle Center malls in Indianapolis staged one-day strikes September 16 against the \$42 billion property giant Simon Property Group charging they are paid poverty wages and little or no benefits. According to workers, they earn between \$5.00 and \$7.00 an hour.

The National Labor Relations Board is currently investigating charges that Indianapolis janitorial contractors used harassment and intimidation against janitors for talking about their working conditions.



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