Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 October 2006

Latin America

Chilean teachers threaten to strike

The Professor's Union (CP) has given President Michelle Bachelet an ultimatum: high school teachers will walk out October 17 unless their contract demands are addressed. Contract negotiations have been going on since June.

The CP represents 80,000 educators, about 65 percent of Chile's teachers. They are demanding a five percent wage increase, a pension fund, seniority raises and changes in the education laws.

On September 26, the CP mobilized its members in protest marches, part of a "social strike." The teachers were joined by secondary school students, university students and government and health workers.

Peruvian doctors close to launching third strike in two years

Thirteen thousand doctors who work for the Peruvian Health Ministry called on the government to come to the negotiating table to resolve health, budget and wage issues that were left unresolved when striking doctors returned to work last year.

In an interview with the Mexican NOTIMEX news agency, Julio Vargas la Fuente, president of the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP), indicated that the 140 hospitals that form Peru's public health system face critical shortages. They are forced to work with obsolete equipment and must make do with a chronic lack of basic supplies, medicines and vaccines. Vargas warned of an impending medical crisis with the reemergence of diseases that were under control in the past, such as malaria, dengue fever and bubonic plague. He said such diseases "cannot be allowed to continue to cause havoc among the poor."

The doctors are demanding a budget increase to bring spending in public health to closer to 7.5 percent of gross domestic product—the average for Latin America—up from the current four percent ($740 million.) Vargas also said that the average public health doctor's wage in Peru of $1,200 per month is below the Latin American average.

If the doctors do walk out—the strike date is set for October 28—it will be the third strike in less than two years. Public health doctors struck in March 2005 for a week and on March 2006 for 17 days.

Uruguayan construction workers end strike

Construction workers involved in the building of a cellulose plant in Fray Bentos, Uruguay for the Botnia Company ended their strike on Friday.

The union representing the workers objected to a company plan to employ 1,000 European workers in the installation of plant equipment. Currently, 300 Europeans are working at the site. As part of the agreement to end the strike, Botnia management agreed to prioritize the training and hiring of local workers before bringing in Europeans. The union agreed that an undetermined quantity of specialized workers could be brought in from such places as Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany. In addition, management agreed to increase meal allowances and severance pay for the strikers.

Fray Bentos is on the Uruguay River, which marks the border between Uruguay and Argentina. The future cellulose plant is controversial. Across the border, thousands of protesters have demonstrated against the project because it is anticipated that its polluting impact will create an environmental danger to the region's tourist and fishing industries.

Temporary workers walk out at Peruvian iron mine

The Shougang Iron Mine in Peru has been partially paralyzed by a strike by temporary workers. The strike began last Thursday when the workers blocked a road leading into the mine. They are demanding that the company comply with the terms of their contract.

The mine continued production at a reduced rate, employing those workers who were already inside when the blockade took place. Hugo Sosa, leader of the Shougang permanent miners union, denounced management for not allowing those workers to leave and for pressuring them to continue production. "They are forcing them to work but without food or sleep," said Sosa.

Bank clerks reject offer and walk out in Brazil

Brazilian bank clerks rejected management's offer and walked off their jobs in a strike of indeterminate duration. The strike, which began last Thursday, involves 380,000 employees from banks across Brazil. The National Confederation of Finance Sector Employees (CONTRAF) announced that virtually all of its 108 member unions joined the job action. In São Paulo alone, 36,000 have joined the

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strike.

Bank workers are demanding a 7.05 percent wage hike and a one-time bonus of about $700, citing record bank earnings this year. CONTRAF also demands that workers be compensated for losses in real wages caused by past inflation and a five percent profit-sharing program.

On September 26, bank workers carried out a 24-hour work stoppage to press the National Bank Federation, which represents management, to address its wage demands. No agreement has been reached. CONTRAF leaders indicate that management's proposal of 2.85 percent barely makes up for last year's inflation and does not include profit-sharing. Management is also offering a $210 bonus.

Argentina: University professors launch new strike

Demanding better salaries and improved university staffing, professors at the National University of Rosario and at the UTN have gone on strike. Leaders of the strike said that 2007 appropriations for university teaching throughout the country do not cover growth within the system. According to the instructors, the budget for the universities should be tripled to recover from the levels reached during the "pesofication" of the Argentine economy in the 1990s. The professors are also demanding cost-of-living adjustments, the democratization of the universities, an 85 percent readjustment for retirees, and the regularization of the 35,000 adjunct workers.

United States

Lockout at Indiana plant

ASF-Keystone Inc. locked out 130 workers at its Hammond, Indiana plant October 2 after workers voted down a contact proposal the previous day by a 2-1 margin. The workers, who make heavy industrial springs for railroad cars and construction equipment, arrived for their early morning shift to find security guards blocking the main entrance to the plant.

Workers rejected two separate contract offers. The first three-year offer had raises of 25, 35 and 40 cents an hour. The second provided raises of 40, 50 and 50 cents an hour. But the proposals included increases for employees in insurance costs, a major issue for workers about to retire. United Steelworkers Local 2003 Chairman Tony Herrera told the Gary *Post Tribune*, "We've got a few guys talking about retirement, but their insurance costs are so high, all of their pension will go towards it. It's ridiculous. They want these guys to retire with no benefits."

Rail company files suit over Ohio slowdown

Norfolk Southern Corporation filed suit in US District Court last week against the United Transportation Union and Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen over an alleged slowdown waged by workers in Columbus, Ohio. On September 20 the company implemented a new automated system at the Columbus' Buckeye Yard which displaced a number of workers, igniting a slowdown.

The suit charges, in part, that the two unions did not do enough to inform workers "of their obligation to work in the efficient manner required by the applicable labor agreements." The suit seeks payment from the unions for damages and to block any future slowdowns at its operations elsewhere in the country. Norfolk Southern is one of the nation's largest railroads, operating lines from Texas to Maine.

Canada

Durham transit workers on strike

Some 300 transit workers at the Durham Region Transit Commission east of Toronto walked off the job October 5, following the expiration of a strike deadline. According to the president of Local 222 of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the union that represents the workers, the strike affects up to 30,000 daily riders and will continue until there is arbitration or management shows it will negotiate in good faith. The strike comes after 18 days of negotiations, during which the union presented a list of 52 demands in opposition to the employer's demands for concessions. These include monetary demands, the removal of contracting-out language, and the halting of a planned increase in part-time jobs. If the contract talks do not resume, the union's next move is to ask for first contract arbitration.

Municipalities adjacent to Toronto including Pickering, Ajax, and Oshawa are affected by the strike.

Nova Scotia social workers vote to strike

One hundred employees of Sunset Services, a residential care facility (RCF) in Pugwash, 170 km north of Halifax, voted 92 per cent in favor of strike on October 6, beginning a 14-day countdown to a possible walkout. The workers, who are members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 972, are residential counselors and support services staff at the Sunset facility, which provides a residential center, group home, supervised apartments and a vocational training center.

Management has taken the position that a higher shift and weekend premium negotiated as part of a provincial settlement do not apply to casuals. It is also withholding an adjustment offered to cooks.

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