Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 October 2006

Latin America

Oaxaca teachers' assembly votes to end strike, then reverses itself

Delegates Section 22 of the National Educators Union (SNTE) met in Oaxaca on Saturday and Sunday. The tumultuous meeting began at 8 p.m. on Saturday and ended at 10 a.m. on Sunday. The delegates first lifted the five-month-long job action that demanded the resignation of the state's governor, Ulises Ruiz. However, the assembly then reversed itself and voted to poll the states's 70,000 teachers instead.

The meeting had been called by Section 22 President Enrique Rueda with the purpose of ending the strike. However, the assembly reversed itself to prevent an imminent split in the SNTE.

Oaxaca teachers will vote on Tuesday and Wednesday this week on whether to end their walkout immediately or to continue the strike until Ruiz is removed from office.

Governor Ruiz survived a Senate vote last week to remove him from office. In the wake of that vote, an emboldened Ruiz indicated his intentions to remove protesting teachers and their supporters from the center of town this week.

Thousands of transport owner operators walk out in Uruguay

Twenty thousand truckers, 5,000 taxicab drivers, and hundreds of farm vehicle operators walked off their jobs to protest high fuel prices in Uruguay. The job action began in response to a decision by the government of President Tabare Vazquez that raised fuel costs by US$0.05

Continental Tire employees plan joint strike action in 11 countries

Delegates of unions representing Continental Tire employees in four countries met in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, on October 18 and 19. At a press conference, delegates from Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and the United States announced their intention to contact the unions of Continental Tire employees across the world to agree on a joint strategy to combat the anti-labor policies of this transnational company.

Delegates reported that the company pursues a double strategy against workers. In Europe and the United States, the company has shut down 10 plants since 1995. In the semi-colonial world, it violates human rights and contractual rights of employees.

An example of the company's modus operandi is the purchase of the Euzkadi tire maker in El Salto, Mexico, by Continental Tire. Once in control, Continental Tire management increased production quotas, eliminated bonuses and cut wages while increasing working hours. Employees blocked the company's new policy. In reprisal, the plant was closed and the employees fired.

Continental Tire employs 18,000 workers around the globe.

United States

Ready-mix drivers strike in Iowa and South Dakota

Some 50 ready-mix concrete drivers launched an unfair labor practice strike against companies in Vermillion, South Dakota, and Sioux City, Iowa. While Teamsters Local 554 is alleging bad-faith bargaining on the part of the company, the issue separating the two sides is healthcare costs.

According to an attorney for Standard Ready Mix LLC, and Ludey's Ready Mix, the company's "last, best, final offer" contained a wage increase in each year of the three-year proposal. But Danny Aveln, vice president of Local 554, said that healthcare was a "huge issue." Currently, 19 members of the union go without medical coverage due to the high cost.

No negotiations have been scheduled since the strike began. The ready-mix companies have indicated that they will seek to maintain customer orders despite the strike.

Walkout at Florida Wal-Mart

Workers at a Wal-Mart store in Hialeah Gardens,

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Florida, staged a walkout October 16 to protest a sharp reduction in hours. About 60 workers left the store to parade in the parking lot over a new schedule that required workers to only clock 35 hours per week with some given weekly schedules as low as 9 hours.

Workers chanted in Spanish demanding a 40-hour week. One worker held a makeshift sign that said, “Wal-Mart, we are human, we want respect.” A Wal-Mart district manager, attempting to end the wildcat action, gave up and returned inside the store as workers vented their anger at him. Finally, another manager convinced workers to return inside the store for a meeting.

A Wal-Mart spokesman subsequently declared, “It was a mistake, we’ve corrected it, and we’re taking appropriate actions to make sure it doesn’t happen again...we communicate with our employees in a fair and consistent manner.”

In a separate development, a Philadelphia jury awarded 187,000 Wal-Mart workers $72 million for working unpaid overtime and without rest breaks. The class-action suit covers the period from 1998 to 2006.

Returning strikers locked out at Tennessee nuclear material plant

Workers for Nuclear Fuel Services (NFS) were denied entry to the company’s Erwin, Tennessee, plant October 20 after voting to end their five-month strike. NFS management told the media that “the process for calling back union workers will not be one where any union employee can simply show up and go back to work. The process will be defined by the company as to who and the number of those asked to report back to work will be.”

United Steelworkers Local 9-677 struck NFS on May 15 over the company’s drive to gut work rules, pensions and insurance. While workers voted to go back to work, there still is no contract settlement. NFS processes nuclear material for commercial and governmental uses.

Canada

Hamilton teaching assistants poised to strike

More than 2,000 teaching and research assistants at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, voted 81 percent in favor of strike on October 16 if a contract settlement is not reached. The university triggered a countdown to a strike or lockout by requesting a “no board” report from the conciliator on the first day of conciliated bargaining. The TAs and RAs are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3906. The main issues in negotiations are protection from tuition fee increases (already achieved by TAs and RAs at other leading Ontario universities), protection from overwork and job security. The president of Local 3906 said that the TAs and RAs are teaching huge classes, having a lot of unpaid overtime and, “to top it off, we’re looking at an effective pay cut of $177 to $500 every year because of tuition fee increases.”

Initially, the strike deadline was October 23, but the union extended it to October 27 in order to review a contract proposal put forward by McMaster’s administration.

Independently of McMaster University assistants, 1,900 teaching assistants at Carlton University in Ottawa, represented by CUPE Local 4600 gave their union a strike mandate on October 20 by the same margin. They are also protesting against tuition fee hikes, as well as health and dental benefits and better assistance for international students, and security for non-Anglophone students.

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