

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 November 2006

## Latin America

### Peruvian teachers reject free market reforms

Last week teachers across Peru walked off their jobs to protest the so-called municipalization of educational services. The government of President Alan Gracia has initiated a pilot program in which several hundred primary schools will be handed over to municipalities—currently they are under federal aegis. A presidential decree initiated the program on October 1. Teachers charge that the municipalization is a first step toward privatizing the school system.

### Sugar-mill employees walk out in Mexico

Workers represented by the Sugar Industry Union (SIA) walked off their jobs at 58 sugar mills on November 16. The main issue is the right to a pension for 3,000 recently retired workers. Mexican law stipulates that the retirement age is 60 for mill workers with 35 years of service. However a court opinion in 2000 increased the retirement age to 65, with 40 years of service.

Since then mill owners have applied the ruling retroactively, denying pensions to workers that were employed under the old rule. Sugar workers are demanding that the court ruling apply only to workers hired after 2000. Management has refused to accept a union proposal to gradually provide pensions for the 3,000 workers who have been left in a kind of pension limbo. Sugar workers are also demanding an increase in wages and benefits.

The strike will have a negative impact on the sugar harvest, particularly in the State of Veracruz, which produces 40 percent of Mexico's crop. Veracruz's mills had started processing the crop earlier than usual and had to stop operations. In the rest of the country the harvest is scheduled to begin at the end of this month or the beginning of December.

### Three-day strike by petroleum workers in Argentina

Argentine petroleum workers launched a three-day

walkout on November 14. The strike by workers in four of Argentina's Patagonian provinces—Neuquen, Rio Negro, Chubut and Santa Cruz—where many of that nation's oil and gas wells are located, interrupted natural gas exports to Chile. The main issue in the strike was compensation for taxes that workers pay when they work overtime. In negotiations mediated by the Labor Ministry, oil companies agreed to pay 100 to 600 pesos extra per month (US\$32 to \$192), depending on overtime income.

## United States

### Punitive bond set for pickets arrested in Houston janitors' strike

A Harris County, Texas District Attorney set a \$39.1 million bond for 44 striking Houston janitors and their supporters who were arrested in two days of civil disobedience. The actions come as the struggle waged by 1,700 newly organized janitors in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is into its fourth week against low wages that result in workers receiving as low as \$20 a day with no health insurance.

In addition to those arrested, another four were injured when assaulted by mounted and foot police seeking to break up the protest. An SEIU release quoted a striker involved in the protest, "The horses came all of a sudden. They started jumping on top of people. I heard the women screaming. A horse stomped on top of me. I fell to the ground and hurt my arm. The horses just kept coming at us. I was terrified. I never thought the police would do something so aggressive, so violent."

### Walkout at North Carolina slaughterhouse over immigrant victimizations

Some 1,000 workers walked out of Smithfield Foods' hog-slaughtering plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina November 16 to protest the company's firing of workers under suspicion of using false documents. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which has been trying to organize the

plant, the walkout halted production at what is considered to be the world's largest hog slaughterhouse.

Smithfield management disputed the UFCW claim, saying it maintained production at a 70 level percent during the walkout. Nevertheless, the company agreed to rehire the fired workers and refrain from victimizing those who walked out, after a meeting was held with representatives from a local Catholic church.

## **Canada**

### **London transit workers vote to strike**

Employees of London Transit in southern Ontario voted on November 13 to give their union a strike mandate if no agreement is reached in bargaining, which has been ongoing since May. The London Transit workers, who are members of Local 741 of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), include 328 bus drivers and about 100 staff in jobs such as maintenance and dispatching. Their last contract expired on July 1st of this year. The union president said there are a few big issues outstanding, but wouldn't say which issues they were. After management failed to respond to the union's demands, the union requested that the provincial government send a conciliator.



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