

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 November 2006

Latin America

Mexican sugar workers return to work with no agreement on pensions

Some 26,000 striking workers returned to work at 58 Mexican sugar mills with no agreement on November 24. The workers walked out eight days earlier in a dispute over pensions and wages.

Both the National Chamber of Sugar and Alcohol Producers (CNIAA) and leaders of the Sugar Workers Union (STIASRM) agreed that negotiators had parted on “good terms,” by tabling the conflict over pension rights. The union’s decision to end the action is a victory for management, as now employers can proceed and begin the sugar harvest, which was delayed by the strike.

Union leader Enrique Ramos declared that management had agreed to create a commission to study pensions in the sugar industry as part of a revision of wages and other benefits. It appears that in return for concessions on pensions, the CNIAA will demand a reduction in wages and other benefits. Sugar workers’ real wages have fallen by 60 percent since 1991.

A decision imposed by the Federal Labor Court (JFCA) and ratified by the Supreme Court in 2000 increased retirement age for workers from 60 to 65, also requiring 40 years of work for a pension (up from 35). The strike began after 3,000 retirees, who qualified for company pensions under the old rule, were denied their pension rights.

Leaders of five smaller so-called independent unions that represent workers at five mills explained that the decision to lift the strike had to do with avoiding government intervention on behalf of the sugar companies. They also indicated that STIASRM was responsible for selling out the workers’ pension rights in 2000.

Mexican oil workers strike

Two hundred employees of Oceanografía and Transportes Navieros Terrestres (TNT), both subcontractors of Mexico’s state-owned oil company Pemex charged with transporting workers to and maintaining offshore oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, walked off their jobs on November 24. The workers are demanding back pay and claim that the companies have become “decapitalized” because they made large political contributions.

Strikers complained that their wages have been incomplete for the last two months. “This is becoming a custom for the bosses,” said one of the workers. Workers report that since they sometimes spend up to 50 days straight on the oil platforms, they depend on the company to deposit their wages on time directly into their accounts. “In many cases we reach land and find that the company has kept our pay. All the companies do that; they play with our money.”

Oceanografía, which had a diver killed in a recent accident, has among the highest number of employee complaints in the industry.

Government workers battle police in Chile

Six workers were injured and 28 arrested in a confrontation between striking government workers and police in Santiago, Chile, on November 23. The confrontation took place as thousands of government employees marched down the Alameda, Santiago’s main street, toward the Moneda Palace, Chile’s central government building. One of the six injured workers was brutally beaten and transferred to a hospital with serious injuries, including a detached retina.

Government workers, members of the National Government Employees Group (ANEF), went on strike November 22, demanding an increase in wages and job security. ANEF represents 76,000 civil servants and customs employees. The 48-hour strike was in response to ANEF’s refusal to accept a wage proposal from the Bachelet administration. ANEF is demanding a 10 percent wage hike and that the thousands of temporary employees be made permanent.

Paraguay: strike continues at the Clínicas Hospital

Medical students at the National School of Medicine in Asunción have declared themselves in solidarity with the 11-day nurses’ strike at the Clínicas Hospital and the Mothers and Infants Center (CMI) and threatened to walk out this week. Both Clínicas and CMI are associated with Paraguay’s School of Medicine.

Aidan Robles of the nurses’ union denounced the national legislature for prolonging the strike at the hospital that provides essential services to the poor. She indicated that many patients traveling from rural areas did not know of the strike. She said nurses, acting in the “humanitarian spirit that

characterizes our hospital,” left the picket line to attend them.

The strike was sparked by the refusal of the lower chamber of the legislature to increase the 2007 budget for both institutions by 15,000 million guaranies to improve wages.

United States

Temporary work stoppage at Northwest over outsourcing

Northwest Airlines baggage handlers at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport stopped work for a half-hour November 22 to protest the decision by the company to shift airplane-cleaning duties to an outside contractor. The International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents baggage handlers, declined to call the incident a work stoppage, while Northwest Airlines management merely said it was a union rally.

In an attempt to save face, IAM leaders said the union would not help Northwest management in transitioning the work from IAM members to the outside contractor and would file a grievance. The company claimed no workers would lose their jobs due to the outsourcing and no disciplinary action would be taken over the work stoppage.

The cleaning tasks in question had been performed in the most recent period by the IAM as a temporary reward to the labor bureaucracy by management for the union’s strikebreaking against the 2005-2006 strike by the rival Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). The IAM crossed AMFA picket lines to perform some of the struck work—including the cleaning of planes—that had previously been performed by AMFA.

This past week, a bankruptcy judge approved an agreement between AMFA and Northwest that concludes the strike. Among the terms of the agreement was a clause that permitted Northwest to hire outside contractors to perform cleaning work. Northwest plans to begin the transition of cleaning work to an outside contractor by December 5.

Transport company pressing to break union in helicopter strike

The union representing striking helicopter workers charged that their employer, PHI, has obstructed a return to work by asserting preconditions that violate the Railway Labor Act. The Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) said that any return to work requires the company to rehire pilots to open positions in order of seniority and cannot be overridden by company rules. The company also insisted that the union provide clarifications, corrections or retractions for all statements during so-called corporate campaigns—i.e., public relations campaigns aimed at investors and customers.

Another stipulation barred the union or individual members from “calling, sanctioning, condoning,

participating in or otherwise engaging in any strike, work stoppage, slowdown, sick-out, picketing, corporate campaign activities or other self-help measures either individually or collectively following an unconditional return to work.”

Helicopter pilots who provide services for the medical and gas industry walked off the job September 20 over medical benefits, mandatory overtime, canceled vacations and separate pay schedules for different pilots. Two days into the strike, PHI issued letters informing pilots they had been unilaterally replaced.

New York nurses’ union office charged with embezzlement

The chief financial officer of the New York State Nurses Association was indicted November 22 on charges he embezzled \$1.2 million from the union. John T. Daley was arrested last June for possibly committing as many as 127 forged check transactions. Daley was fired last spring from his \$130,000 position at the 34,000-member union after checks were found missing, and it was discovered that a typewriter ribbon contained a history of the transactions embedded in it.

Canada

Niagara Parks Commission employees vote to strike

About 550 employees of the Niagara Parks Commission voted on November 19 in favor of a strike by a margin of 93 percent. They are fighting one outstanding issue—the contracting out of their jobs. “The Niagara Parks Commission is systematically destroying jobs and replacing them with outside contracts,” said the bargaining team chairperson. The employees, represented by Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU/NUPGE), tend to the grounds and greenhouses, perform maintenance, and operate restaurants, concessions and tours at Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Conciliation is scheduled to begin on December 6, and workers will be in a legal strike position by December 31.



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