

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 December 2006

Latin America

Morgue attendants on strike in Peru

Employees at of morgues across Peru walked off their jobs last Thursday. The workers are demanding higher wages; most earn between US\$100 and US\$200 per month. The employees, many of them highly skilled, report that there has not been a raise in ten years, a period in which the cost of living has increased substantially from a combination of price increases and increases in the value added tax (VAT).

The morgues handle the bodies of people who have died in traffic accidents and those that require post-mortems because of other circumstances. In addition to the low pay, workers say that they face a constant risk of contracting infections.

Colombian workers reject Uribe's economic measures

Thousands of Colombian workers took to the streets on Thursday to protest economic measures being imposed by President Álvaro Uribe. Colombia's three labor federations organized the demonstrations, together with a federation of retirees' groups. Students and public employees took the day off to attend the rallies.

The protesters rallied in major cities across the country demanding an end to the Free Trade Treaty with the United States and lower taxes on consumption. The also protested a proposed partial privatization of the country's oil company, ECOPETROL and changes in the way government money is disbursed to the departments that would result in lower social spending.

Public television workers threaten to strike in Chile

On December first, employees of Chile's TVN network voted overwhelmingly to strike unless the station addresses workers' wage demands. The strike would take place on December 11.

The vote at three separate assemblies was near unanimous—627 out of 634 votes in Syndicate 2 and 3;

earlier that day Syndicate 1 had voted 101 out of 103 in favor of the strike. The workers are demanding a monthly wage increase of US\$47 and a one time signing bonus of US\$3,800. In addition TVN employees are demanding that all workers at the network receive health and other benefits.

United States

OSHA scientist threatened with suspension

An Occupational Safety and Health Administration official threatened one of its scientists with a 10-day suspension if he did not make changes to an agency advisory bulletin that warns auto mechanics that brakes they work on could contain lethal asbestos fibers. Ira Wainless, the OSHA scientist, refused to make the changes, which were directly urged by former OSHA head John Henshaw.

Henshaw's request is seen to be a direct product of a campaign by sections of the auto industry. Henshaw worked with two consulting firms, ChemRisk and Exponent, which were funded to the tune of \$23 million by Ford, General Motors and Daimler-Chrysler to combat asbestos lawsuits by workers.

Henshaw claims that asbestos is no longer used in the United States. However, the *Baltimore Sun* reported in a May 2006 article that imports of brakes with asbestos have increased by 83 percent during the last decade.

Sick-out by California city workers

Some 100 Pasadena, California municipal workers called in sick December 1, one day after the city's contract offer was revealed to workers. Neither the city nor the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 858 are making details public, but union president Marchell Parker characterized the offer, saying, "They basically offered us peanuts." The main problem, according to the union, was a lower than anticipated cost-of-living offer by the city.

City officials charged that the sick-out was timed to disrupt the weekend's USC-UCLA Rose Bowl

festivities. Local 858 represents about 280 workers in the Department of Public Works and Pasadena Water and Power. The union denied any responsibility for the sick-out.

Coal operator at Sago mine cited for safety violation

The Associated Press reported December 1 that West Virginia regulators cited the International Coal Group for allowing workers last September to bring damaged emergency equipment into the Sago Mine. Heat indicators on the air packs of six miners revealed that the packs had been exposed to excessive heat. In January 2006, 12 coal miners were killed in an explosion at the Sago Mine that has been attributed to safety failures by the company.

Canada

Lockout ends at Quebec ski resort

On November 23, the lockout at the Mont Orford ski resort in Quebec ended after the Fédération des Travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), the union representing 100 workers at the resort, announced that it had reached an agreement in principle with management. The lockout was imposed on October 31 by André L'Espérance, the owner of the Mont Orford Ski Station. The latest announcement came only several hours after the Quebec Environment Minister had issued an ultimatum to both sides to resolve the dispute or the government would intervene.

The provincial Liberal government is in the process of privatizing the Mont Orford park's ski and golf facilities. According to a union source, the lockout seemed to be "as much about L'Espérance's desire to squeeze money out of the province as it is about squeezing the workers."



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