

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 December 2006

Latin America

Peruvian public school teachers announce strike plans for 2006

Peruvian teachers are poised to strike this January to protest mass sackings and to demand more government money for the schools. Recently approved legislation is expected to result in the layoffs of thousands of teachers.

The Chiapas Independent Media web site quoted Robert Huaynalaya Camposana, an official of the Peruvian Education Workers Union (SUTEP), who announced last week that teachers intend to launch a strike of indefinite duration as soon as the school year begins. Huaynalaya denounced the government of Alejandro Toledo for sacrificing education to the demands of Peru's international creditors and the International Monetary Fund. Huaynalaya indicated that the lack of funding would lead to schools being left without teachers, particularly in Peru's rural areas.

The 2006 budget approved by the legislature is smaller than the previous year's. While the legislature rejected a tax-cut measure proposed by Prime Minister Pablo Kuczynski, it did approve an accelerated repayment of Peru's US\$1.5 billion debt to the Paris Club of creditor nations, at the expense of education and other social programs.

Argentina airline workers strike

Employees of Southern Winds airline walked off their jobs on December 9 to demand the company immediately pay them salaries that are in arrears. Union leaders also charged management with dismantling the company. Only one of its eight airplanes was working at the time the strike began.

In addition to back wages, the workers are demanding the company keep workers informed of the airline's future plans. The airline, which for the most part operates domestically, was implicated in the smuggling of narcotics into Spain in November 2004.

Also last week, the unions representing pilots and mechanics at Aerolineas Argentinas announced that they would sue the Argentine government and airline management for interfering with the right to strike. Aerolineas workers are in the midst of a dispute of wages and layoffs at the airlines.

Subway workers strike in Buenos Aires

Workers at Buenos Aires' five metro lines walked off their jobs on December 5 to press for a wage increase. The strike, which lasted the entire day, was sparked by a breakdown in negotiations between the workers and management at the Labor Ministry.

The subway employees are demanding a 58 percent wage increase and have rejected a 21 percent offer from the private operator of the lines, Metrovias. The unions are also demanding

that the agreement cover those temporary and part-time workers not directly employed by the company. While there is no agreement on these issues, the unions said they have accepted an interim agreement on other issues.

Union leaders declared that as far as they are concerned the strike was merely suspended and that it can resume at any moment.

United States

Tentative agreement in Ohio teachers' strike

Negotiators for the school district and the union representing striking teachers in Bridgeport, Ohio, reached a tentative agreement December 7 in a four-week-old strike. Members of the Bridgeport Education Association walked out on strike charging they were the lowest-paid teachers in Belmont County. The new agreement, yet to be ratified by teachers, represented a compromise. In the first year, teachers would receive a 3.25 percent raise and another 3.0 percent raise in the second year. Teachers with 16 years and less will also receive an additional step increase.

During the strike, security guards were accused of assaulting teachers. The district was also accused of hiring substitute teachers who may not have been certified. Both guards and teachers were hired through the Huffmaster Company in Michigan.

Indiana workers reject new contract, continue strike

Workers at an Indiana pump and meter manufacturer rejected a new contract offer December 4 aimed at ending a three-week strike. Members of Teamsters Local 414 in Fort Wayne voted 113 to 14 to reject a second offer by Tuthill Transfer Systems that calls for deeper cuts in benefits.

The new agreement offers workers wage increases of \$1 an hour in the first year, followed by subsequent annual increases of 45 cents and 46 cents. However, in the new contract's first year alone, workers would lose an estimated 40 cents an hour due to increased healthcare costs.

Two days after workers voted down the latest offer, Tuthill management moved to hire 100 replacement workers. Tuthill operates 26 facilities around the world.

Workers strike Kentucky Pepsi plant

Members of Teamsters Local 651 walked out on strike December 5 against the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company's attempt to wipe out seniority rights for new job posts. The 44 inside workers had voted unanimously the previous day to reject the company's last offer, despite a recommendation by the Teamsters negotiating committee.

In the past, company job postings were awarded on the basis of seniority when all other qualifications were equal. According to a Pepsi spokesperson, the new seniority clause would only affect

future employees. Some 20 drivers, represented by a separate union, continue to work during the strike.

New Jersey teachers rally

Thousands of New Jersey teachers and government workers rallied in the state capital of Trenton December 11 to oppose proposed cuts in pensions. At least three school districts cancelled all classes for the day because of the protest. In other areas, the teachers' union agreed to limit participation in order to avoid disrupting classes.

Members of the New Jersey Education Association are opposed to an attempt by the state legislature to offset planned cuts in property taxes by raising the state retirement age from 55 to 62 and other measures to reduce pension costs.

Democratic Governor Jon Corzine has asked the legislature to temporarily table the measure while the state seeks to impose the cuts through the leadership of the teachers and other public service unions, whose contracts expire in July 2007.

Strike vote at South Lake Tahoe schools

Teachers in the South Lake Tahoe School District will take a strike vote this week due to lack of progress in contract talks. The 226 teachers in the California district have seen no progress in negotiations that began in March.

The main issue is the percentage of the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to be passed along to teachers. Each year, the state awards districts a certain amount of COLA, which can be used to cover expenses, including salaries.

No strike is expected before the report of a fact finder, due sometime this week.

Workers protest company refusal to hire veteran workers for Alcatraz ferry

Several hundred workers rallied December 9 at a San Francisco pier to demand ferry workers retain their jobs in the wake of a change of operators for the ferry service to Alcatraz island. The nonunion operator Hornblower Cruises & Events won the new 10-year contract from the National Park Service and has only hired about 12 of the 55 workers who were members of the Inlandboatmen's Union of the Pacific and the Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots, some of whom had 30 years' service on the ferry.

Under federal law, should a majority of workers hired by Hornblower come from the mariners' unions, the company would automatically become a union shop. The ferry carries more than 1 million people every year to Alcatraz and brings in an annual \$18 million in revenue.

Construction workers injured in roof collapse

Sixteen construction workers were injured December 8 when the 24th floor of a new construction project in Rosslyn, Virginia, collapsed under the weight of newly poured concrete. Workers with shovels dug through 12-18 inches of wet concrete for about two hours to free those who were caught in the collapse. One fireman also suffered a back injury during rescue operations.

The accident occurred on the Waterview luxury development site that overlooks the Potomac River and is being developed by the Clark Construction Group LLC. The accident is being investigated by the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry and is expected to take several months before a final assessment is made public.

Union officials admit embezzling funds

A former union official has admitted embezzling more than \$110,000 from a Chicago local of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Carol McCormack, a controller and office manager for UFCW Local 100-A, stole the money from union members' healthcare payments during the 1997-2001 period.

As a result of her plea bargain, McCormack will be sentenced on February 21 and could end up serving from 12 to 18 months under federal guidelines.

Meanwhile, a former New Jersey union official pleaded guilty in a federal court last week to embezzling \$40,000 from Local 236A of the Glass, Molders/Plastics International Union 9. Marie Elena Clayton, who served as secretary-treasurer of the union during 2002-2004, when the money disappeared, admitted to making out 74 checks to herself and other officials and then forged signatures when cashing them. Clayton faces a possible five-year prison sentence and fines as high as \$250,000. She will be sentenced in March 2007.

Canada

Vancouver transit strike looms

Employees of SkyTrain, the Vancouver transit company, may be on strike by the end of next week. The 516 workers, who include attendants, control operators, skilled trades, maintenance and clerical staff, voted 90 percent in favor of a strike on December 8. It would be only the second strike in the history of SkyTrain; the first one was in 1999 and lasted only one day.

The SkyTrain workers, represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 7000, are seeking parity with wage rates, shift premiums and benefits that other unionized transit workers have secured at TransLink subsidiaries, such as Coast Mountain Bus Co. They are also trying to secure appropriate compensation for extending their collective agreement beyond the 2010 Winter Olympics.



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