

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 December 2006

Latin America

Venezuelan teachers to strike in January

Teachers in the City of Margarita, in Nueva Sparta state, have indicated they will strike in January to press for a 40 percent wage increase over two years—30 percent in 2007 and 10 percent in 2008.

On January 8 and 9, teachers plan to rally in front of the Teachers' House in Caracas to protest the government's refusal to address their wage demands. Inflation in Venezuela is expected to reach 20 percent this year.

Costa Rican and Canadian teachers declare their solidarity with Oaxaca teachers

Costa Rican and Canadian teachers met in Oaxaca on December 17 to declare their solidarity with the struggle of Oaxacan teachers in Mexico. According to Jenny Sims of the British Columbia Teachers' Union, the educators are concerned by the critical situation facing teachers from the state of Oaxaca who have been engaged in a struggle over wages since May and have demanded the resignation of Oaxaca's governor, Ulises Ruiz, since June.

The assembled teachers also intend to expose numerous human rights violations against teachers as a result of repressive measures by federal and state police and to establish lasting channels of communication with Oaxacan teachers. Scores of Oaxacan teachers are in jail as a result of government attacks on their strike.

Argentine gas station employees walk out in San Juan province

Gas station attendants walked off their jobs in the Andean province of San Juan on Friday, December 15, as part of a struggle over wages. The gas station workers are demanding a 30 percent wage increase. The strike was to last 24 hours, but state authorities intervened and forced the workers back to work after 18 hours.

The strike was 95 percent effective and created a temporary shortage of fuel, as motorists lined up at the

few remaining stations. The union that represents the workers announced it would continue its struggle with strikes on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.

Venezuelan auto glass workers strike

Employees at Vivex, a manufacturer of auto windshields and mirrors, went back to work last Thursday following a two-week strike that had shut down auto assembly plants in this country. Assemblers for Mitsubishi, General Motors and Toyota had to furlough their workers last week due to a shortage of glass for their automobiles, affecting the production of some 40,000 vehicles.

The strike that began December 7 resulted from an impasse in negotiations over a new contract. Vivex workers had been working without a contract for 17 months. In addition to a wage hike, Vivex workers were demanding a health plan and other benefits. Both sides were under pressure to settle by the auto companies and the government. No details of the settlement have been released.

Demand for autos in Venezuela is on the rise, spurred by low interest rates on auto loans. Vivex management indicated that enough glass would be in stock to early January to allow the plants to begin producing.

United States

Seattle janitors strike

Seattle janitors working for the nonunion cleaning service Cascadian Building Maintenance began a strike on December 4 that has spread throughout the Seattle region, according to the Seattle Solidarity Network. At issue is the fact that janitors receive a mere \$10 and no benefits cleaning buildings occupied by Cingular, The Gates Foundation and the *Post-Intelligencer* newspaper. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has been seeking to organize Cascadian janitors.

Elvia Gonzalez told *seattlesolidarity.net*, "I need to have health insurance for my daughter. We're on strike for better benefits, and most of all to get respect. We

know they'll only hear us if we're united." Gonzalez also raised the issue of safety, pointing out that "the cleaning chemicals are very harsh" and believing they will affect workers' health.

County workers in New York picket to demand higher wages

Office workers for New York's Schuylers County picketed to demand higher wages as their union and county officials deadlocked in negotiations. About 140 white-collar workers, represented by the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), are opposing the county's 2.5 percent pay offer.

Workers are instead demanding a deal similar to that received by the county's nonunion workers. Non-bargaining unit workers received a 4 percent pay increase and a 1 percent merit increase. The current four-year contract for the CSEA will expire at the end of the year. The union says it will continue picketing until it comes to an agreement. Under New York law, county workers cannot strike.

Canada

Public sector strike in Saskatchewan halted

About 13,000 public sector workers in Saskatchewan had just begun strike action over the weekend when union leaders intervened to avert a confrontation, citing a possible advance in contract talks. Their union, the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union (SGEU), had called for the strike to begin on Saturday, December 16. However, shortly before the walkout, the chair of the negotiating committee for the union, Barry Nowoselsky, announced that no job action would be taken "as a sign of good faith and to allow for more talks."

If there is no serious movement in negotiations, workers will walk off the job before the end of next week, he added. Nowoselsky had issued a 48-hour strike notice on December 14, but sent out a statement calling off the strike just hours before workers were to walk out.

In recent talks, the provincial government was offering a salary increase of 9.5 percent over three years, while the union was demanding 27 percent. In addition to a wage increase, issues in the conflict include a reduced workweek, workload issues, protection against contracting out, pension plan improvements and language dealing with workplace harassment and unfair hiring practices. The last strike

of Saskatchewan public sector employees was in 1992 and lasted four months.



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