

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 January 2007

Latin America

Brazilian government and unions agree on minimum wage increase

The Brazilian government and union leaders have agreed on terms of an increase in the country's minimum wage. The monthly minimum salary will increase from \$163 to \$177. The agreement includes adjustments based on the rise in the cost of living. Unions originally demanded an increase to \$196. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has threatened to veto any attempt by Congress to raise the minimum wage above the level negotiated by the unions.

United States

Las Vegas nurses continue struggle over staffing

Nurses at Valley Health System in Las Vegas are continuing a struggle over staffing levels and other contract terms in the wake of a two-day lockout in December. The company has erected a fence around its two facilities and is reportedly forcing nurses to pass through several security screenings.

The lockout prompted the intervention of Nevada state officials, who brokered a one-month "cooling off" period. The two hospitals are owned by Universal Health Systems, one of the largest and most profitable US hospital chains. The nurses, members of the Service Employees International Union, have been working without a contract since May. Issues include staffing, benefits and union access to hospitals. Nevada currently faces a nurse shortage and is ranked 49th in staffing.

In reversal, AK steel union backs rejected contract

The union at AK Steel's Middletown, Ohio works has endorsed terms of a company proposal voted down 2-1 by the membership in October. About 2,500 workers were locked out in February of 2006. Since that time the company has maintained production with strikebreakers.

Leaders of International Association of Machinists Lodge 1943 said they have dropped their opposition to outsourcing provisions contained in the last company offer. In exchange, the union is asking for a medical grievance procedure to prevent the company from using

back-to-work physicals to screen out older workers.

AK Steel management responded coolly to the offer, saying the rejected contract is no longer on the table.

New York paper workers vote down contract

Workers at the Finch, Pruyn & Co paper mill in Glen Falls, New York have rejected a contract proposal that would have substituted a 401(k) type plan for the traditional pension. The offer also included a 6 percent cumulative pay raise over three years. The workers, members of United Steelworkers locals 18 and 155, comprise 78 percent of the hourly workers at the facility.

Workers have not had a pay raise since 2000, and the unions agreed to significant concessions following a five-month strike in 2001. Five smaller unions at the mill have already ratified contracts with the company. Those agreements will run for five years and include a \$2,000 signing bonus.

New York film parking workers rally

Parking production assistants working in the film, television and commercial industries in New York City rallied in front of the NBC television broadcasting headquarters in Rockefeller Center in the midst of heavy Christmas tourist and rush hour crowds. NBC-Universal, a subsidiary of General Electric, is refusing to negotiate with the United Auto Workers (UAW), although a large majority of the three hundred workers have signed union cards.

The assistants and coordinators' job is to clear out and hold parking spaces for the entertainment industry in New York. With the dense automobile traffic and intense demand for parking spaces, this job can be dangerous. This is done at least 12 hours in advance so that production equipment can be trucked in and spaces needed for filming cars are clear.

Signs at the rally demanding "Justice on Law and Order" referred to the popular NBC-Universal TV show. Jean Sassine, a parking worker for 17 years explained the work conditions: "In the last 12 years, our pay went from \$90 to \$125 for a 12-hour shift, plus we get \$20 if we have our own car to take up a space and take turns sitting

in it during the winter. So we sometimes need to work 100 hours a week. We don't have bathrooms, a problem especially for the women. Most of us are people of color so they treat us like we are invisible. Telling people they cannot park in front of their own house can be dangerous but we need to be skillful so they do not get angry at the industry.”

Among the 150 workers at the rally were supporters from the NYU Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) and CSEA unions. Graduate students organized by the UAW at New York University went on strike unsuccessfully a year ago to prevent the administration from ending recognition of their union after the National Labor Relations Board reversed an earlier decision to allow graduate students of private universities to organize unions.

Canada

Performers union prepares to strike

The Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), the union representing 21,000 English language film, television and radio performers across Canada, announced it would strike January 8 if no agreement is reached with North American producers. ACTRA postponed strike action when its contract expired January 1, and agreed to further negotiations on January 3 to avert an industry-wide shutdown.

Negotiations between the union and the producers' organization broke down after union representatives rejected the producers' offer 0 percent, 0 percent and 1 percent wage increases over the next three years. Also, according to the union, the producers maintained contract requirements that “amount to demanding work from Canadian performers on the Internet for free.” On December 22, ACTRA members voted 97.6 percent in favor of going on strike if its demands aren't met. A strike would affect all television and film work in Canada. ACTRA averted a strike in 2001 after it reached an agreement with the film and TV producers' association.



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