

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 January 2007

Latin America

Tension builds over labor negotiations in Mexico's sugar mills

The Sugar and Alcohol Workers Union is set to strike if negotiations fail over a pension system. Union leader Enrique Ramos indicated that the workers are very determined to carry out their job action and not accept compromises with the sugar companies.

Negotiations over pensions for 3,000 recently retired employees who don't fully fit government imposed requirements and have yet to collect their checks were tabled last year as part of a compromise that ended a strike against 58 sugar mills. At that time both parties agreed to reach a pension agreement.

Peruvian teachers protest government evaluation plan

The Peruvian teachers union called on their members not to participate in a government evaluation test on January 8 and to rally in the streets instead.

Union officials do not trust Peruvian President Alan Garcia's assurances to the country's 270,000 educators that the outcomes of these tests will not put their jobs in jeopardy. Government officials stressed that the purpose of the evaluation is to retrain teachers in various subjects. Union officials objected to the test itself, calling it unilateral, political and one more step toward the privatization of Peruvian public education. Government and church officials have accused the teachers of "preventing the improvement of public education in the country."

United States

Arizona defense manufacturer moves to hire replacement workers

Raytheon Missile Systems has begun hiring strikebreakers at its Arizona facility that manufactures the Tomahawk missile and works on other projects for the US Defense Department. The move comes as a two-month-long strike by 2,000 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) is

continuing against the company's drive to impose increased healthcare costs while providing minimal wage increases to senior workers.

Some 90 percent of the workers voted to reject the company's offer back in November. The company compelled its engineers to assume production responsibilities, but the long duration of the strike is making that tactic difficult to maintain. Raytheon and IAM Local 933 union officials are scheduled to meet independently with a federal mediator this week.

Talks in Texas garbage strike break off with no resolution

Contract talks between Allied Waste of Fort Worth, Texas and Teamsters Local 767 broke off January 3 without any progress as the three-week strike by trash haulers continues. No details of the negotiations have been made public.

The contract covering 220 drivers and helpers expired December 10 and about 100 of the workers walked out on strike December 18. Allied Waste has been unable to keep up with trash pickup in the 25 communities outside of the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area and has brought in temporary workers from its other waste pickup operations in Texas and other states.

Lawsuit launched against Continental Tire attempt to shift healthcare costs to retirees

The United Steelworkers (USW) and workers who retired from Continental Tire North America filed a class action lawsuit last month charging that the tire maker has broken its contract agreement promising lifetime insurance coverage to its retired workers and spouses. Last November Continental sent out a letter to workers announcing different dates during 2007 in which it would transfer a large part of the cost of medical care to retirees and their dependents. Continental will be placing a \$3,000 cap on company contributions for healthcare.

Bush administration to allow companies to bar access to data on chemical pollutants

The Environmental Protection Agency established new rules in December that will allow corporations to withhold data on toxic chemicals to which they expose workers and communities. The guidelines will permit companies to dispose of 10 times the amount of pollutants previously permitted under the Toxic Release Inventory without reporting it.

The Bush administration's move came despite the fact that 122,000 individual commentators weighed in against the new measure, while a mere 34 comments were logged in favor. The Toxic Release Inventory is a federal program that allows workers access to information concerning the use and release of toxic chemicals on the job and in their neighborhoods.

Jury finds two union officials guilty of racketeering

A Broward County, Florida jury found two union bureaucrats guilty January 5 of racketeering conspiracy during their terms as national leaders of the American Maritime Officers. Michael McKay, who served as president, and his brother Robert, who served as secretary-treasurer, face possible 20-year sentences on the racketeering charges. In addition, both were found guilty of mail fraud, and record-keeping offenses. Robert McKay received an additional guilty verdict of embezzlement.

The prosecution argued that the two officials used union funds meant for medical, pension and vacation benefits for their own enrichment. Before taking over the union the brothers' father controlled the union presidency for 36 years. The 4,000-member American Maritime Officers represents workers on commercial ships.

Canada

London, Ontario health workers vote to strike

About 100 workers at Middlesex-London Health Unit (in London, about 190 km southwest of Toronto) voted on January 6 in favor of a strike by a margin of more than 90 percent. The workers, who include public health inspectors, health promotion workers, and clerical staff, may strike if no agreement is reached between their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and management. After the negotiations broke off on December 21, the health unit asked for a January 20 lockout deadline.

According to a union representative, the principal issue in dispute is the hours of operations: the health

unit has demanded the right to schedule employees to work on Saturday, while currently most of them work Monday to Friday.



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