

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 January 2007

Latin America

Former Bracero workers renew their campaign for pensions

Mexican farm workers who worked in California, Texas and other US states under the “bracero” program, part of an agreement between the Mexican and US governments to provide low-paid Mexican agricultural labor to US farms between 1942 and 1964, will launch a campaign this week to force the Mexican government to return money that was deducted from their wages toward their pensions.

The aging workers point out that during the duration of the program, the Mexican government deducted 10 percent of their wages. The money was to be paid into a retirement fund in Mexico City. Mexican authorities claim not to know what happened to that money, deducted from 400,000 workers.

The campaign for the return of the funds and the interest it should have accumulated began 10 years ago with protests on both sides of the US-Mexico border. The surviving pensioners are appealing to the new government of President Felipe Calderón to finally act on this matter.

Mexico City urban rail operators to strike

Operators of Mexico City’s underground and light rail trains, members of the Mexican Street Car Alliance (ATM), are set to strike on January 20. ATM leader Benito Bahema Lomé indicated that transit authorities have yet to respond to the union’s demand for a 10 percent wage increase and a substantial improvement in benefits. ATM leaders consider that their demands are modest and necessary to make up for a drop in buying power that resulted from wage caps imposed by the past administration of President Vicente Fox that have resulted in real wage cuts of 20 percent for all workers.

The ATM workers are also concerned that the both the subway and light rail lines are underfunded, a condition that leads to the deterioration of passenger service. The combined system employs 3,500 workers

and carries nearly 500,000 passengers each day.

Argentine airline workers strike

Employees of LAN Airlines walked off their jobs at Buenos Aires’ Aeroparque airport last Thursday to press for their demand for a wage increase. LAN employees have been negotiating a wage hike for nearly two years.

The workers accused management of making workers pay for their own wage increases by canceling a year-end bonus of US\$100 despite having received government permission to increase LAN fares. Union members also accuse management of repeatedly breaking the contract.

LAN airlines, originally LAN Chile, operates in Argentina, Chile, Peru and Ecuador.

Colombian coal miners protest

Two thousand three hundred union miners at El Cerrejón, Latin America’s largest open-pit coal mine, are threatening to strike on January 23. Contract talks have come to an impasse over wages, working conditions and benefits.

Coal exports from the Cerrejón mine have sharply increased in recent years, from 21 million metric tons in 2000 to 27.5 million tons in 2006, as world prices reach historically high levels. Cerrejón workers are demanding a 9 percent wage increase that will more closely reflect the company’s windfall gains than the 6 percent that management has offered. The workers also want better medical benefits, scholarships for their children and improved working conditions to protect them against hazardous and unhealthy conditions at the mine.

Cerrejón is owned by a consortium of transnational companies that include Xstrata, Anglo American and Billington.

Brazilian university professors demand back pay

The professors of the Estate University of Ceará (UECE) in the city of Fortaleza walked off their jobs last week demanding their December salaries. The

decision to strike was taken January 8 in an assembly attended by 200 professors, by delegates of non-teaching UECE employees and by student representatives. Despite assurances by the state government to begin paying back wages, the strike was declared. Célio Coutinho, president of the University Union (SINDUECE), said, “this job action is a demonstration of our indignation over the neglect of a basic right of all workers.” Nine hundred professors are employed by UECE.

UECE had only recently returned to work on December 10, following a five-month strike. The previous walkout was over the professors’ demands for wage increases and other modifications promised under the federal Jobs and Salary Plan (PCCS), which was supposed to bridge the gap between UECE’s substandard salaries and those at other Brazilian universities.

The strike ended when the administration of President Lula approved a R\$14 million increase of funds for PCCS in 2007. Several professors at the last week’s assembly denounced December’s settlement as an example of “too few gains and too many promises” by the state and federal governments. Ceará State is located in Brazil’s northeastern coast.

United States

Helicopter pilots to return to work

Helicopter pilots who struck PHI, Inc. for two months last fall will return to work following a court-supervised agreement last week between the company and union. However, a dispute still remains over whether returning pilots will have to sign a pledge to refrain from further strike activity against the company, whose major contracts provide helicopter services to oil companies operating derricks in the Gulf of Mexico. “We want the right to fire them” should the pilots engage in further labor actions, said PHI attorney Hal Broussard.

About half of the PHI pilots went on strike in September. By November, the union made an unconditional offer to return to work. But PHI only rehired some 100 pilots that directly contacted the company and refused to allow a remaining 90 workers to return. The latest agreement will allow some 30 pilots who have independently contacted with the company as of January 11 to return to work by January 29. The remaining 60 pilots will be returned to work

over the subsequent 90 days.

Social service workers plan to strike Pennsylvania facility

Members of the Pennsylvania Social Services Union Local 668 were slated to walk off the job last weekend following a 116-10 rejection of a “last best offer” by the Cornell Abraxas Youth and Family Services, which is located near Marienville. While management for the juvenile treatment facility offered wage increases between 8.5 percent and 12.25 percent, workers remained opposed to a two-tier health care proposal.

Current employees would be allowed to retain the superior HMO plan, but workers hired after contract ratification would be forced to accept an inferior PPO plan that would also cost new hires more money than more senior employees. New hires would also receive less vacation and sick time than current employees. Management justified the new measures, declaring, “Our request for increased employee medical contributions is consistent with what many unions and employers have agreed to in the face of rising costs of health care.”

The Cornell Abraxas Youth and Family Services facility serves 274 adolescents, providing drug and alcohol counseling while operating a private school.

California court workers rally for increased wages

Court workers with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 660 rallied outside the Pasadena County courthouse January 11 to press their demands for higher wages. Negotiators for the courts have offered workers a 7 percent raise.

Workers are citing 10 percent raises being paid to other county workers and demanding equitable treatment.

Some 50,000 California county court reporters, legal processors and supervisors are represented by the SEIU in current bargaining.



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