

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 January 2007

## Latin America

### Colombian coal miners to strike

Miners at the Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia voted to authorize a strike last Thursday. A strike could take place at any time this week, though union leaders left open the possibility of an agreement before a walkout actually occurs. Cerrejón is the largest open-pit coal mine in Latin America; it employs 4,700 workers and is a significant source of Colombia's coal, the nation's second-largest export.

### Strike threat at Mexican research institute

Clerical employees at Mexico's famous Colegio de Mexico, an internationally known research institute for the social sciences and humanities, announced their intention to strike on February 2. The 300 administrative employees are demanding an 8 percent raise. Academic employees, who are also negotiating salary increases, announced that they will support the strike.

A spokesperson for the employees announced that, barring a settlement this Monday, a strike is almost a certainty because at the union meeting that voted to strike, workers also voted not to extend the strike deadline.

### Nicaraguan public health doctors vote to strike

Public health doctors represented by the Medical Decent Salary Movement (MMPS) are confronting newly elected President Daniel Ortega with the threat of a strike, the first he has faced by public employees. MMPS leader Dionision Morales declared that the medical personnel plan a series of escalating strikes to force the new government to comply with agreements made by former President Enrique Bolaños.

The first strike, which Morales called a "warning," is scheduled for Tuesday and will last one hour. The job action will involve 32 public hospitals and 200 clinics.

A strike last year that paralyzed the public health system was settled when the outgoing administration agreed to a contract that contained graduated wage

increases to bring salaries to the Central American average.

### 24-hour strike by Peruvian army nurses

Members of the National Union of Peruvian Army Nurses (SNEEP) carried out a one-day strike last Friday. The nurses also rallied at the Central Military Hospital to protest the refusal of the hospital's director to use merit as a criterion for the appointment and promotion of nurses. Director Samuel Gamero Ramirez is accused of acts of favoritism and corruption in the hiring of nurses and the management of the hospital.

### Argentine oil workers protest blacklisting

Patagonian oil workers who were fired for striking by Pride Oil in November distributed leaflets in the city of Rio Negro last week denouncing the fact that they are being discriminated against whenever they apply for a job in any other oil company in the region.

The oil company fired about 100 employees "with cause" in the wake of an 11-day strike, making them ineligible for unemployment benefits. The affected workers appealed to government labor authorities, saying that the company's act constituted a reprisal and an illegal "mass sacking." The government ignored the workers' appeal. The protesters in Rio Negro indicated that the Union of Private Oil and Gas workers (SPGP), to which they belong, also refused to act on their grievance.

Since then, none of the fired workers have been able to find jobs at other oil companies. "For the most part, the companies refuse to interview us. In the few cases in which we were able to present resumes documenting our work experience, they have told us that we are on a no-hire list of former Pride Oil workers," declared Carlos Muñoz, one of the fired workers. For that reason, the workers decided to leaflet the city to obtain the support of the population.

In a related development, employees of French-owned Total Oil, who are also represented by SPGP, ended a strike last Tuesday against two oil and gas

plants in Patagonia after the company agreed to raise monthly wages by US\$270. The union had originally demanded a US\$400 increase.

### **United States**

#### **Arkansas teachers strike over pay**

The 148 teachers at a Marianna, Arkansas, senior high school carried out a job action by calling in sick January 25 after the school district rejected their request for a \$1,300-a-year pay increase. Teachers, who have not had a raise in the last three years, have been frustrated by the school board's refusal to take their demands seriously.

A school official said teachers could only get raises based on new funding from the state legislature, which is several months off. Currently, Marianna teachers make \$31,000 to \$44,000 a year. Bus drivers, maintenance and office workers, who are demanding a \$750 annual raise, also joined the job action.

#### **Immigration raid on North Carolina meatpacking plant**

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided the world's largest pork-processing plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, January 26 and arrested 21 immigrant workers who are slated for deportation. The 20 men and 1 woman were immediately transferred to a jail facility in Lumpkin, Georgia, some 700 miles from the Smithfield Packing Co. plant where the arrests took place.

Gene Bruskin, who heads the Smithfield Justice Campaign, told the *Fayetteville Observer*, "The entire community has been terrorized. Parents are being torn from their young children who don't know where they are. Many of these workers have given their life blood to this company for [years] and now are being summarily handed over to be arrested and discarded. It is unconscionable and continues Smithfield's pattern of callous disregard for the well-being of its workers."

The raid came on the same day that Smithfield reached an agreement with the National Labor Relations Board to hold a new union election at the Tar Heel plant. The agreement also settles a \$1.1 million case of back wages to workers terminated by the company.

#### **Ex-union officials sentenced in embezzlement case**

Two former officials representing workers at the Miami-Dade County's Water and Sewer Department in Florida were sentenced to 2 years' house arrest and 10

years' probation for their role in embezzling funds from Local 121 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Rafael Mendez and James Gonzalez are also being ordered to repay Local 121 the combined amount of \$129,434 and \$25,000 each to Travelers Casualty and Surety Co. of America.

The Office of the Inspector General discovered a large number of unauthorized checks had been written to both Mendez and Gonzalez during a five-year period leading up to 2004 when the two officials left office. Mendez served as Local 121 president while Gonzalez served as vice-president.

### **Canada**

#### **Employees of Food Workers union strike in Manitoba**

Seventeen office workers employed by United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 832 walked out on January 22 at the union's Winnipeg, Brandon and Thompson offices in Manitoba. The workers, represented by Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE), are fighting their employer's attempts to impose wage cuts and concessions. According to the chief negotiator of the COPE local, the main stumbling block in negotiations has been the UFCW's insistence on two-tier proposals that would see any future employees work longer hours, and earn less vacation time and a lower rate of pay. The office workers' last contract expired last year on April 30.

#### **Distillery workers ready strike**

Workers at a Gimly, Manitoba, distillery, about 100 kilometers north of Winnipeg, voted overwhelmingly on January 23 to strike if no agreement is reached between the union and company management by February 1. The Gimli distillery, owned by international conglomerate Diageo, is the sole producer of Crown Royal whisky. The 53 workers are members of UFCW Local 200D.



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