

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 March 2007

Latin America

Lula threatens to restrict right to strike

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva indicated last week that he intends to send draft legislation to Congress to limit government workers' right to strike. Lula said this in response to reporters' questions about statements made by Paulo Bernardo, Brazil's minister for planning. Lula was in Georgetown, Guyana, for meetings with the presidents of Mexico and Chile and the Argentine foreign minister as part of the 19th summit meeting of the Rio Group.

Bernardo was quoted by Brazil's official press agency as saying that "even though the Constitution guarantees the right to strike, we need to safeguard citizens' interests; there must be limits." For his part, Lula denounced "abuses of the right to strike, not just in the public sector but in other categories." He claimed that the new legislative proposal would "make sure that a contract, once signed, would bind both parties. The rules of negotiations mean that there is a point beyond which strikes are impermissible."

In his response, Lula indicated that as a union leader in the Sao Paulo metal industry he acted responsibly by not shutting down essential functions of struck plants. "We would agree that certain departments would not stop. Sometimes it is possible to reach the conclusion that some can strike and others can't," he said. According to Lula, a government composed of former union bureaucrats is "morally equipped" to limit strikes.

Political observers believe that what is driving the Lula administration on this question is an ongoing conflict with air traffic controllers. Strikes and slowdowns by the controllers began last October. At issue is the demand by the flight controllers that internationally accepted working conditions, air traffic safety and manpower standards be observed in Brazil.

Construction workers stop work at Pan-American games stadium in Brazil

A walkout of 1,100 construction workers last Friday stalled work at the Joao Havelange Stadium in Rio de Janeiro. The stadium is being readied for the Pan-American summer games that will take place this July.

The workers are demanding a 15 percent raise, improved safety equipment, better and more sanitary working conditions, and higher quality lunches. Strikers said that the water they are forced to wash with is unsanitary and pointed out the presence of dengue-fever-infested mosquitoes on the worksite.

An outbreak of dengue fever is affecting northern Rio de Janeiro, where the stadium is being built, due to stagnant waters on the site.

The stadium/sports complex is one of the main venues for the summer games. Work on this facility is behind schedule. The resulting speedup recently contributed to the death of a construction worker, who fell from the structure's ceiling.

Patagonian oil workers strike for better pay

More than 500 oil workers in Argentina's southernmost province of Tierra del Fuego went on strike last Friday demanding higher wages. The strike affects transnational companies that produce oil and natural gas, such as France's Total, and the US's Apache, as well as Roch, a domestic firm. The walkout took place as a result of a breakdown in contract negotiations.

The oil workers are demanding an increase of US\$400 in their monthly wages.

United States

Pennsylvania teachers end contract protest

Teachers at Baldwin-Whitehall, Pennsylvania schools will return to the classroom March 1 without a contract agreement after seven days on the picket line. The 328 teachers, who work at the district's high school, middle school and three elementary schools, walked off the job to protest an offer that will limit salaries over the course of a three-year agreement to 1.5 percent, 2 percent and 3 percent, while requiring teachers to

contribute to healthcare coverage by 1 percent of salary in the first year and 2 percent in subsequent years.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association, which represents the teachers, asked for wage increases of 5.75 percent in each of the three years. They opposed the hike in healthcare costs and also disagreed with district negotiators over supplemental contracts that cover teachers such as coaches.

The union halted the strike one day before the state limit on the duration of teachers' strikes. The contract covering teachers expired June 30 of last year. Two new negotiating sessions have been scheduled for March 8 and 12.

Texas sanitation workers end two-month strike

Fort Worth sanitation workers ended their strike February 26 without an agreement with Allied Waste. Teamsters Local 767 had called for a vote to end the strike, claiming that a continuation of the strike would harm a pending appeal to the National Labor Relations Board.

Workers walked out December 18 after their old contract expired when company officials refused to set a date for negotiations to begin.

The union won an NLRB election February 13 when Allied Waste workers voted 133-73 against a decertification attempt. The Teamsters filed unfair labor practices charges accusing the company of refusing to bargain in good faith, harassing workers and not withholding union dues, which the NLRB found to have partial merit.

Allied Waste allowed workers to return to work under terms of a unilaterally imposed contract, which provides for a pay raise and ends the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks.

Ohio bakery workers strike

Workers at Klosterman's Bakery in Springfield, Ohio walked out on an unfair labor practice strike February 27. The 175 members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union are opposed to hikes in healthcare costs that result in less coverage.

The union is also opposed to management's attempt to shift away from the current company-funded pension to a 401(k) plan and has also raised concerns over job security. Klosterman's has been seeking to fill orders by obtaining products from other unionized bakeries. No talks have been scheduled between the two sides.

Canada

Steelworkers set to strike

Over 1,100 steelworkers employed by the Iron Ore Company of Canada (IOC) in Quebec and Labrador could be on strike as early as March 8 after giving their union, the United Steelworkers of America, an overwhelming strike mandate last week. While the union says the company has increased its offer for wages and a signing bonus, IOC is insisting on the right to contract out jobs to nonunion workers.

The IOC is the largest manufacturer of iron ore pellets in Canada and supplies North American, European and Asian producers.



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