

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 March 2007

Latin America

Peruvian teachers to protest draft legislation

Teachers in Peru have set March 28 as the date for a national teachers' strike to oppose the new education law that would eliminate the right to strike for teachers and make it easier to terminate teachers' employment. Union leaders charge that the law is the first step by the right-wing government of President Alan García to restrict the right to strike and protest for all government workers.

The decision to strike came following a March 10 and 11 convention of the teachers union, which met to discuss Peru's education crisis in the context of the social crisis affecting Peruvian workers and peasants. Teachers denounced a campaign by the government and the official media to demonize teachers and public education with the aim of building support for privatizing schools.

Peru's legislature formally approved the so-called Basic Education Law on March 15. The new law declares education an essential service, restricts strikes by teachers and gives the government the power to hire strikebreakers.

Patagonian educators strike

Public school teachers in the Argentine Province of Santa Cruz voted last week to strike for 72 hours beginning March 20 to demand higher wages. The teachers will also conduct protest marches and rallies across the province this Wednesday. Last Thursday, over 3,000 teachers marched in the city of Río Gallegos and rallied at the province's Government House and at the Education Council. Hospital workers and court employees have solidarized themselves with the teachers' demands and plan to participate in Wednesday's protests.

Governance Secretary Roque Ocampo threatened to discount teachers' wages for missed days at the rate of 250 pesos (about US\$80.00) per day. The teachers voted to strike anyway.

Teachers strike in Nicaragua

Teachers belonging to a union independent of official Sandinista unions initiated a series of Friday strikes in Managua's five largest public schools demanding an increase in pay. The Managua teachers have rejected a US\$17 increase in monthly wages, negotiated between the National Nicaraguan Teachers Association (ANDEN) and the government of President Daniel Ortega.

The leader of the Managuan Teachers Confederation, Yanet Chávez, declared that the raise does not even cover the cost of transportation for teachers. The Managuan teachers also charged the government with negotiating only with ANDEN.

Panamanian construction workers protest deadly conditions

Construction workers in Panama threatened to mobilize and strike after the death of two colleagues due to the negligence of the construction company that employed them. The workers were poisoned and drowned in wastewater in a housing project under construction in the town of San Miguelito.

The workers, Agustín Abrego, 28, and Anel Adames, 50, had been sent down a narrow access pipe to clear an obstruction in the sewer, where they were overcome by fumes as they were hit by a wave of water. Adames is believed to have drowned. Abrego died in the hospital, a victim of toxic waste poisoning. The deaths were the sixth and seventh in the construction industry in the last few days. Two other workers are hospitalized.

The Union of Construction Workers (SUNTRACS) blamed the government for its lax enforcement of safety rules in the industry. SUNTRACS pickets will mobilize this Tuesday in Panama.

Labor Minister Reynaldo Rivera denied that the government is charged with enforcement of regulations and blamed the workers for the accident, claiming that it is the workers responsibility for making sure that the scaffolding is safe and that there are appropriate guard

rails are in place. He called on the private sector to help make workers conscious of the measures they must take and called on subcontractors to provide adequate safety measures.

United States

West Virginia teachers stage walkouts in 14 counties

Members of the West Virginia Education Association staged walkouts in 14 out of 55 of the state's counties March 14 in an effort to compel the state government to increase wages for the state's 20,000 teachers. A walkout the previous week in one county led West Virginia's legislature to increase Governor Joe Manchin's original proposal from 2.5 percent to 3.5 percent. But the state's teachers are demanding an increase of six percent, citing the fact that West Virginia is 47th in the nation in teacher salaries, with an average \$38,000 annual wage.

The legislative session ended last week and a spokesperson for the governor's office declared that no amount of pressure would cause them to raise teachers' pay. "We have no intent of revisiting that this year, and the governor has said that to the leadership of both unions." In addition to the 17,000-member WVEA, another 7,300 members are represented by the American Federation of Teachers. AFT president Judy Hale opposed this week's action by the WVEA.

Iowa workers strike container plant

Workers at the Smurfit Stone Container plant in Sioux City, Iowa walked out on strike March 15 after contract negotiations between the company and Lodge 1426 of the Machinists Union broke down. Issues separating the two sides were pensions, overtime and wages.

The 53 workers rejected the company's one percent pay offer, charging their wages already lag \$1.70 behind hourly rates of another container company in Cedar Rapids. Workers also want a reduction in overtime hours. They work 12-hour shifts most days of the week under what the union calls "sweatshop conditions."

The company warned workers one-day before the strike that they would hire replacement workers. "We have an obligation to our customers and our shareholders to continue our operations," said a company spokesman.



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