

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 April 2007

Latin America

Refuse workers strike in Sao Paulo

Sao Paulo sanitation workers employed by five garbage companies went on strike last Friday. The striking drivers and helpers rejected a company offer of a 3.12 percent wage increase; they are demanding a 12 percent wage increase, full medical coverage, summer uniforms that include protection against the sun, and company paid meals. As a result of the strike some 6,000 tons of refuse is accumulating daily in this city of 12 million, a major financial center and the heart of Brazil's industrial region. Not all of Sao Paulo's 14,000 sanitation workers are on strike. Some remain on the job under a legal requirement that in a strike by civil servants, 70 percent of the employees stay on the job.

Patagonian teachers protest continue

Education workers in the Argentine Province of Santa Cruz began a four-day strike on Monday, April 16. The decision was taken on Saturday in an assembly of the Santa Cruz Docent's Association. The assembly demanded the immediate resumption of negotiations by provincial authorities. During the strike, teachers will converge from across the province on the governor's palace in the city of Río Gallegos. In addition to a wage increase, the teachers are demanding an end to informal arrangements that provide teachers pay above their salary range that does not count toward their retirement.

Last week, protesting teachers occupied the Provincial Legislature for several hours. The teachers are demanding a base salary of US\$740. Were they to win this demand, starting teachers would still be some US\$390 short of the official minimum needed by a family to make ends meet. This is the latest incident in a wage struggle involving teachers across Argentina.

A striking teacher was killed in Neuquén Province, also in Patagonia, when he was hit at close range by a tear gas canister during a protest march. The first day of the Santa Cruz teachers' strike coincided with a

24-hour national strike to protest the Neuquen killing. Workers in Neuquen planned to rally at the governor's mansion to demand his resignation.

Strike by Peruvian iron miners

Fourteen hundred miners at the Shougang Perú iron mine walked out and blocked the roads of the mine, effectively shutting down the facility, located in southern Perú. The purpose of the strike, which began April 10, is to protest management's decision not to renew the contracts of seven workers. Union leader Augusto Cruzado accused Shougang management of mistreating workers and asked for the Labor Ministry to intervene on the workers' behalf. Shougang management claims not to be a party to this fight, since the workers are not employed directly by the mine. They are employed by a labor broker called "Cooperativa de Trabajo y Fomento del Empleo Santo Domingo."

United States

Grocery workers strike Ohio IGA store

About 75 workers at Thorne's IGA grocery store in Carrollton, Ohio walked out on strike April 12 over management's attempt to alter contract language in an effort deny workers full-time health benefits. The previous agreement required 32 hours per week over a three-month period in order to attain full-time benefits. The new proposal seeks to raise that to 37 hours per week.

According to United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 880, the average IGA employee makes \$6.85 per hour, while top pay for a clerk is \$7.45 an hour. The rejected contract offered to high seniority workers only two 15-cent raises. IGA also wants to end employee-participation in a first-tier insurance program and transfer all workers to a second-tier program that provides half the coverage. The previous contract covering Carrollton workers IGA expired in June 2006. Workers have twice rejected IGA proposals. A mediator was brought in on April 10.

No negotiations in California teachers' strike

There are no new negotiations as 1,300 teachers near the end of their second week on strike against the Hayward School District near San Francisco. The teachers, members of the Hayward Education Association, walked out of classes on April 5 in an effort to improve their salary position, which places them thirteenth out of 17 Alameda County school districts. The school district is only offering a three percent bonus in the first year of a new contract followed by a seven percent increase in the second year. However, teachers are demanding back-to-back eight percent increases over the next two years.

Last year teachers absorbed the cost of budget shortfalls by only receiving a one percent raise. The year before they had a 2.87 percent and the two years before that they had a wage freeze. The teachers' determination to obtain eight percent pay raises was sparked by recent pay increases awarded by the Hayward superintendent Dale Vigil to three district administrators. Vigil, who rakes in approximately \$250,000 a year, has declared that teacher demands will bankrupt the school district.

Steelworkers strike can company at nine locations

Some 900 steelworkers struck Rexam Beverage Can North America Company April 4 over the company's attempt to impose the rising cost of health care on the backs of workers. Rexam is the world's largest can company. The strike affects the British-owned can maker's operations at eight locations where 730 workers are covered by a master agreement: Birmingham, Alabama; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Phoenix, Arizona; St. Paul, Minnesota; Whitehouse, Ohio; Chatsworth, California and Bishopville, South Carolina. Strikers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina work under a separate agreement.

Workers have already rejected two proposals negotiated by the United Steelworkers. Chief negotiator for the United Steelworkers, said, "The members have been emphatic in telling us that health care is too costly for both active employees and future retirees and the company has not done enough to meaningfully address their concerns."

Canada

Rail workers locked out after rejecting union deal again

Workers for Canadian National Railway Co. (CN)

have been locked out across the country after rejecting for a second time a contract that had been negotiated by their union, the United Transportation Union workers Union (UTU). The 2,800 conductors and yard workers voted against virtually the same contract in February. At that time they struck for 15 days before, under threat of back-to-work legislation, their union had them return to work pending a ratification vote, which was only concluded last week. After the latest results were announced, workers began rotating strikes and the CN responded by locking out workers at locations across the country.

CN had offered some improvements in wages and benefits in their new offer, but the main issues, concerning working conditions and the new hard line policy on discipline, were not addressed to workers' satisfaction. Last year the company posted a record \$2.1-billion profit and handed out huge bonuses to top executives but nevertheless insisted it will not offer new money to workers in any future negotiations.

Seafood workers vote to strike

Seventeen hundred workers at seven Newfoundland plants owned by one of Canada's largest seafood processors, Fishery Products International (FPI), voted to go on strike last week. The action prompted George Armoyan, a director for one of FPI's controlling companies, to hand in his resignation. The Fish, Food and Allied Workers union (FFAW) have been without a contract at FPI for over two years and have been fighting company demands for wage cuts of \$1.06 an hour along with a number of other concessions. Armoyan said he wasn't aware of the strike vote and cited frustration with both the union and government as the reason for his departure. FPI was formed by federal and provincial governments over 20 years ago in a bail-out of failing private companies. Workers could be on strike as early as next week.



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