

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 April 2007

Latin America

Mexican trade union leader warns of social unrest

Francisco Hernández Juárez, national leader of the Communications Union, warned that the policies of the current Mexican government have brought Mexico to the edge of civil war. Hernández was a guest speaker at the Third National Miners Convention in México City last week.

He denounced the continuing drop in real wages suffered by Mexican workers, accusing the government of President Felipe Calderón of capping wages, and decried the deterioration of medical and other social programs run under the aegis of Mexico's Social Security Institute. Juárez warned that if Calderón reverses the government's social and wage policies, "things can get out of control."

University professors walk out in Sonora, Mexico

Sixteen hundred members of the Union of Academic Employees of the University of Sonora went on strike last Monday after the professors rejected a wage raise offer of 3.8 percent and an increase in benefits of 1.4 percent. The union is demanding a 30 percent raise in wages and benefits and the resolution of 43 grievances.

Argentine governor attempts to break teachers' strike

On Friday, hundreds of striking public school teachers and other supporting trade union members braved cold weather and marched though the streets of the city of Neuquén in the Patagonian province of the same name to petition the legislature to impeach the provincial governor, Jorge Sobish.

With negotiations at an impasse, Governor Sobish has declared an "education emergency," giving him the power to intervene in the public schools to replace the strikers. The governor also declared that he supports moves by right-wing vigilantes to use force to open the schools.

Leaders of the Association of Education Workers (ATE) declared Sobish's action unconstitutional and a violation of teachers' right to strike. Over the weekend, teachers' assemblies took place to discuss strike tactics. The ATE has so far declared that it will negotiate with political leaders that do not have blood on their hands, a reference to the killing of striking teacher Carlos Fuentealba by the Neuquén police April 5. The chemistry professor spent his last day in agony after being struck by a tear gas grenade fired at close range during a protest march.

University of El Salvador sacks employees following strike

On Friday, administrators of the University of El Salvador

began the process of sacking clerical employees who engaged in a three-week strike that had pitted them against faculty. By the end of the day, 27 workers had been fired. Authorities announced that the terminations of the 700 will continue this week; however, it is expected that only about 70 will be terminated.

During the course of the strike, the workers barricaded themselves inside the university, effectively shutting it down. The conflict began when the government allocated US\$1.9 million for bonuses for clerks and professors. The clerks disagreed with the distribution formula—31 percent of employees' wages—and demanded US\$600 in two equal installments, paid at six-month intervals. The latter formula would benefit the lower-paid clerks at the expense of the higher-paid professors. The union representing faculty had accused the clerks of threatening violence and, while not directly siding with the university, contributed to the isolation of the clerical employees.

So far, only rank-and-file workers have been fired; the administration is barred from firing union leaders involved in the strike without Labor Ministry authorization. University attorneys indicated that they are seeking that authority.

United States

UAW officials condone victimization by truck manufacturer

A press report indicates the United Auto Workers (UAW) international union gave backhanded support to the victimization of 11 workers who launched what has been branded as an unauthorized strike against Freightliner LLC in Cleveland, North Carolina. Meanwhile, workers at the plant last week voted down a contract that the UAW, according to the Associated Press, touted as containing "significant" gains.

Three weeks ago, according to press accounts, UAW Local 3520 officials gave an unofficial go-ahead to workers to launch a wildcat strike at the 4,000-member plant in the hopes of pressuring Freightliner for a better deal. The local had just suffered the slashing of 1,200 jobs, and workers were insisting on a contract comparable to other Freightliner plants.

Immediate pressure from the UAW international to call off the strike led to a collapse of the work stoppage. Out of the 700 workers who walked off the job, Freightliner fired 11, 6 of whom served on the local's bargaining committee. While the union has filed grievances on behalf of the fired workers, a quote by UAW Region 8 director Gary Casteel in the April 18

edition of the *Charlotte Observer* revealed the attitude of the labor bureaucracy: “There are two things a company will take the hardest stance on—workplace violence and an unauthorized work stoppage. They are not going to reinstate them.”

The article continued: “The incident also places the international leadership on the side of the company, which Casteel said has been one of its better employers.... Casteel said there was no need for the April 2 strike: A bargaining session with Freightliner had been scheduled for that week, and 95 percent of workers at the company’s other plants had approved contracts, he said.”

The UAW would not provide details of the recent contract rejection. The *Salisbury Post* reported workers voted down the recent contract by a 749-621 margin. The Associated Press quoted a worker as saying, “Our plant is the breadwinner. It makes money for Freightliner. We should be paid for what we do.”

School officials seek injunction in California teachers' strike

An attorney for the Hayward Unified School District near San Francisco was to have filed a request for an injunction against 1,300 striking schoolteachers who walked off the job April 5 in an effort to improve low pay. The request comes as parents and students joined a march to the school district headquarters to support teachers' demands for a 16 percent pay raise.

Only about a quarter of the district's 20,000 students have been crossing picket lines to attend classes. Bowman elementary school teachers set up what they called “strike schools” at a nearby park where they read to students and held math games.

Two-day strike at Kroger warehouse in Kentucky

Workers at a Kroger Company distribution center in Louisville, Kentucky, returned to work April 19, one day after 750 members of the Teamsters union struck the facility. The Teamsters provided few details, except to say a new six-year contract was ratified that provided improved wages, pensions, healthcare and job security.

Last October, Kroger announced it would turn over operations of the 776,000-square-foot facility to two separate companies: Zenith Logistics Inc., which operates the warehouse, and Transervice Logistics, which manages transportation functions.

Canada

Government forces rail workers back to work

The federal Conservative government rushed through legislation last Tuesday to force an end to the dispute between railway workers and Canadian National Railway (CN) that had halted most rail traffic across the country.

The United Transportation Union (UTU) immediately condemned the move, saying it strengthened CN's bid to break the union. CN last week locked out workers at eight centers across the country while workers had resumed strike action that was first launched and then halted in February. The 2,800

conductors and yard workers have been fighting efforts by their union to push through a concessions contract that they had already rejected, under conditions where CN is posting huge profits and handing out large bonuses to executives.

The legislation compelled the strikers to return to work within 24 hours and now requires both sides to present their best offer—one of which will be chosen as the contract imposed by an arbitrator.

Strikers block union convention

The annual convention of the largest union in the province, the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU), was interrupted last week when the organization's own staff set up picket lines outside the Regina convention center where the event was being held.

Convention delegates refused to cross the picket line of the strikers who are organized under a different union—the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP). CEP points out that their members have been without a contract for the last year and a half, but nevertheless ordered picket lines to be brought down on Friday.

Strikers occupy Ontario credit union

Around a dozen workers occupied the offices of their employer, First Ontario credit union, in Hamilton, Ontario, last week to protest the slow pace of negotiations and to raise awareness of their struggle. Seventy employees have been on strike for more than six months over issues such as sick pay and benefits, but the duration of their strike has put the company in a legal position to fire them.

Hamilton Police moved on the occupation after only an hour, breaking down the padlocked door and arresting one man for interfering with police. Twelve women could still face charges. Ten managers remained in the office during the occupation, although no customers were present. The strikers are members of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE).



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