

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 May 2007

Latin America

Argentina: government workers protest agreement between government and trade union federation

On May 11, members of the State Employees Association (ATE) carried out a 24-hour strike and rally at Argentina's Government House in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo to protest a 16.5 percent wage increase agreed upon behind their backs by the administration of Nestor Kirchner and the General Workers' Confederation (CGT). At the rally, ATE leaders denounced both the accord and the low wages received by government employees.

Bolivian public health strike ends, other protests continue

On May 11, workers employed by Bolivia's network of public hospitals returned to work, ending a two-week strike, but other protests continue against the government of President Evo Morales. In the city of El Alto, near Bolivia's capital, La Paz, thousands of university students clashed with police on Thursday and Friday, demanding student participation in the drafting of a new education law. The university students have the support of high school students, whose main demand is a free high school education and open enrollment in the nation's universities.

Also protesting were peddlers of used clothing and disabled Bolivians who demanded the right to work and freedom to import used clothes. The latter have engaged in a series of hunger strikes in the cities of La Paz, Santa Cruz and Trinidad to press for monthly government stipends.

Mexico: community college professors strike over wages in Baja California

Professors employed by the Bachelors, or community, Colleges of Baja California State (COBACH) went on strike May 9. The strike affects 19 COBACH campuses in Mexicali, Tijuana, Tecate, Playas de Rosarito and Ensenada, affecting 15,000 students. At issue is higher wages for the educators. University authorities have responded to the strike by escalating the use of online tutorials for the students.

In a related development, five Baja California unions announced last week the formation of a block to oppose the state's labor policies. A massive protest march is planned for May 15.

Buenos Aires casino employees walk off the job

Two hundred employees of the Puerto Madero casino walked off their jobs last Friday, effectively closing it down. Puerto Madero operates out of two permanently docked riverboats in

Buenos Aires, Argentina. The United Syndicate of Maritime Workers (SOMU) represents the striking workers. Argentine law requires the casinos, even though they never sail, to have a captain, an engine room chief and other maritime personnel on board. The SOMU members represent 10 percent of the casinos' employees. The rest of the workers are represented by the Union of Gaming Workers (ALEARA). ALEARA is demanding the reopening of the facilities, claiming that ALEARA members depend on tips generated by the casinos, and are facing financial hardship.

Argentina: struggle continues for teachers in Río Gallegos

The school year that usually begins in March in Argentina has yet to start in Santa Cruz province. Last Friday, the teachers in the provincial capital of Santa Cruz voted to extend their job action for another five days. It is expected that their decision will be followed by all the teachers in Santa Cruz province.

The struggle over wages has been complicated by the fact that the new provincial administration has not yet designated new negotiators, due to the resignation of Santa Cruz's governor. He was forced out due to a massive march on May 2 by teachers and other government workers, which was attacked by the police.

Tensions continued to escalate this week. On Thursday, Senator Alicia Kirchner arrived in Río Gallegos to attend the inauguration of the new governor, Daniel Peralta. Both Alicia and her brother, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, are from Santa Cruz. As she exited a downtown restaurant, Kirchner was pelted with eggs and flour by the striking teachers. Peralta's inauguration took place on the same day as a mass "dignity march." The march began two hours before the inauguration and included tens of thousands of striking teachers and their supporters.

The Santa Cruz Teachers Union (ADOSEC) published an open letter to Peralta listing the teachers' wage demands: the demilitarization of the province; the abrogation of emergency legislation that outlaws the strike; press freedom; and the punishment of those who had participated in the repression of striking teachers. Last week, a provincial official claimed that teachers had inflicted injuries on themselves and blamed them on the police, including the case of a municipal worker who was shot by police and lost three toes.

Peruvian miners end their strike

After nine days on strike, copper miners at the Buenaventura mine returned to work last Thursday. At a press conference,

Labor Minister Susana Pinilla explained that the company will raise daily wages by 4.65 soles plus a daily altitude bonus of 7.35 soles and a bonus for working underground of 0.75 soles—a total of 12.75 soles per day.

The ending of the Buenaventura miners strike concludes the conflict that began with a national strike by all miners on April 30. The strike had led to an increase in global copper prices, already at an historic high. A strike continues, however, at the Shougang Peru Iron Smelter, over the reintegration of 10 contract workers that management does not want to rehire.

Chile: CODELCO copper miners protest delayed benefits

On May 9, 28,000 contract miners employed by the state-owned copper company CODELCO announced their intention to launch a national strike. The miners accuse the company of not carrying out last year's agreement to increase benefits. They also accused CODELCO of violating a law that mandates a cash bonus for miners who are not directly hired by CODELCO but are contracted out by labor brokers.

The strike vote took place following mobilizations by contract workers in several CODELCO mines last week. The action resulted in the collapse of negotiations between the miners' union, the Labor Directorate, and CODELCO officials.

A date was not announced for the strike.

United States

Labor board complaint filed against union in Tennessee strike

The National Labor Relations Board will hold a hearing in July for unfair labor practices against the union representing striking machinists at the Maremont Corp. exhaust products plant in Loudon, Tennessee. The complaint charges strikers with intent to "intimidate and terrorize."

The company has pursued a highly provocative campaign against members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 2545 who went on strike February 5. In the first month of the work stoppage, the company issued 88 termination letters against strikers. Security guards and replacement workers have clashed with pickets, including an incident in which one security guard hit a striker with a car.

Maremont offered workers no pay increases while calling for the replacement of pensions with inferior 401(k) plans and asking workers to pay increased healthcare costs.

Executives cash in as Northwest Airlines moves to exit bankruptcy

Northwest Airlines executives will receive millions of dollars in stock allocations as the carrier prepares to exit bankruptcy next month. CEO Doug Steenland will receive \$26.6 million, while four other executives will get between \$10 million and \$13.5 million each.

Northwest declared the executives had earned the awards for leading "one of the most successful restructurings in airline history, reducing the company's cost base, restructuring the fleet, strengthening the balance sheet, while continuing to invest in the business for future growth." The statement also

announced that "creditors, including employees, will receive substantial returns on their claims."

Northwest Airlines used bankruptcy proceedings to cut workers' compensation by \$1.4 billion a year. Contracts implementing these cuts extend through 2011.

Indiana workers reject fifth contract offer

Workers at the Conn-Selmer musical instrument plant in Elkhart, Indiana, voted by a 113 to 20 margin to reject the fifth contract offer during the course of a 13-month strike. Even had workers approved the new contract, the company publicly declared there were no positions available given that replacement workers had filled all available positions.

The Associated Press quoted Trina Gregory, a veteran employee with 19 years. "We're going to ride this train until it stops," she said. "These people gave their lives to this company."

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 364 emphasized that passage of the contract would transfer workers from an on-strike status to that of laid-off, thereby making them eligible for unemployment. Meanwhile, replacement workers have filed a petition to decertify the union.

The Associated Press called attention to the fact that UAW international representative Larry Foster was not present at the vote last week. "He's drawn fire from some union members who say he didn't adequately represent their interests."

Canada

Rail workers set to strike

Thirty-two hundred workers at Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd., the country's second-largest railway, are set to begin strike action at midnight, May 15, marking the third rail strike this year.

Those affected include track maintenance, construction and repair workers as well as inspectors who are represented by the Teamsters Union. The main issue in the dispute is wages, with the company offering increases of 3, 4 and 3 percent in a three-year contract and the union asking for 4 percent in each year. The workers have been without a contract since the beginning of the year. Talks broke off April 28 despite the appointment of a government mediator.

The company has been preparing to use 1,300 managers as replacement workers, a move the union has denounced as a danger to the public. Saying it was "a sad day for the company and for the country," union president William Brehl expressed his regrets about the job action: "Now the company has forced us to go on strike, which will be devastating to the Canadian economy."



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