

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 May 2007

Latin America

Thousands march in Montevideo

On May 20, thousands of Uruguayans marched through downtown Montevideo demanding information about the fate of those who disappeared under the dictatorship that ruled between 1973 and 1985.

The mobilization was led by the Mothers and Family Members of Missing Uruguayans (MFUDD) to protest President Tabaré Marquéz's proposal to seal the records and end investigations and prosecutions concerning the victims of the dictatorship. In return, families of the disappeared would be awarded monetary reparation. The government also intends to compensate family members of those killed by guerrilla forces.

The marchers walked behind a large banner that read: "¿Dónde Están? La verdad ha sido secuestrada. Nunca más terrorismo de estado" (Where are they? The truth has been kidnapped. No more state terrorism). MFUDD members carried photographs of the disappeared. MFUDD has been demanding that Uruguay's military release information on the disappeared since 1995.

Chilean copper miners announce national strike

Workers employed by subcontractors for the Copper Corporation of Chile (CODELCO) mines have decided to begin a national strike of indefinite duration on June 8 to protest the lack of progress in negotiations with the state-owned company. CODELCO employs over 28,000 contract workers.

CODELCO refuses to negotiate a bonus for these workers, claiming that the law under which it operates does not permit it.

Contract workers are not directly employed by the mines and consequently do not enjoy the same contractual rights as other workers. The contract workers recently formed a union, the National Confederation of Copper Contract Workers (CNTCC), which include workers at privately owned copper mines as well as the CODELCO mines.

CNCTCC leader Cristián Cuevas announced the

strike, saying, "We call on all workers to prepare for a long strike. Each section is putting plans into effect in case there is no agreement with CODELCO and with the government in the next few days."

Mexican firefighters threaten to strike over wages

Last Friday the union that represents 800 Mexico City firefighters presented its contract demands, including a 25 percent wage increase and improvements in benefits. The firefighters' union has set a strike date of June 30.

Public school teachers strike in Colombia

Two hundred eighty thousand public school teachers went on strike in Colombia last Wednesday. The strike is to repudiate a government plan to cut the education and health budget. Witne Chávez, leader of Colombia's National Educators, declared: "We have begun this strike of indefinite duration to demand that the national government modify this law that cuts funds."

The Colombian union movement also launched protest marches on the same day on the same issue. More than 1 million workers marched and rallied in Colombia's largest cities. Supporting the teachers are public university employees and faculty; their institutions would also be hit by the proposed cuts.

The new legislation by Colombia's Congress would limit fund transfers from the central government to Colombia's departments and cities. It is in line with demands by the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street Banks as a condition for restoring credit worthiness to the heavily indebted nation.

Colombian president Alvaro Uribe denounced the strikers, calling them liars and claiming that their job action was politically motivated.

United States

Study reveals deficiencies in US vacation leave

The Center for Economic and Policy Research issued a May report that reveals some 28 million American workers do not get paid vacation or paid holidays. The report, entitled "No-Vacation Nation," charges that "The United States is the only advanced economy in

the world that does not guarantee its workers paid vacation.” The report continues, “In the absence of government standards, almost one in four Americans have no paid vacation and no paid holidays.”

Where paid vacation and holidays are made available, the report cites an unequal distribution: “Lower-wage workers are less likely to have any paid vacation (69 percent) than higher-wage workers are (88 percent).... Part-timers ... are far less likely to have paid vacations (36 percent) than are full-timers (90 percent). The problems of lower-wage and part-time workers are magnified if they are employed in small establishments, where only 70 percent have paid vacations, compared to 86 percent in medium and large establishments.”

The report found Finish workers had the best time-off benefits among developed countries, receiving 30 days of paid vacation plus nine paid holidays. French workers are guaranteed 30 days of paid annual leave, but only one paid holiday. Most European workers were guaranteed at least 20 days of vacation and as many as 13 paid holidays. By law, Canadian workers were guaranteed 10 days of vacation and 8 paid holidays.

US law guarantees neither paid vacations nor paid holidays. Among the 90 percent of US companies that did offer time off, they averaged nine days of paid vacation and six paid holidays.

“Relying on businesses to voluntarily provide paid leave just hasn’t worked, declared economist John Schmitt, who co-authored the report. “It’s a national embarrassment.”

Raid targets immigrant workers at Missouri poultry plant

Armed US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raided a poultry processing plant in Butterfield, Missouri and arrested more than 100 workers, alleging falsified Social Security numbers were used to obtain employment. An ICE spokesman said no charges were filed against George’s Processing, Inc., which employs some 1,000 workers at its Butterfield plant.

The raid victimized immigrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who were processed and shipped to jails in St. Louis, Kansas City and Wichita. ICE revealed that workers will probably face hearings before a federal immigration judge and could face prison terms before being deported.

ICE reported that any legal workers caught in the dragnet would not be compensated for lost time from their job.

Canada

Deal ends Greyhound strike

The strike by 1,150 drivers, mechanics and ticket and baggage handlers at Greyhound Canada ended last Friday when workers voted by a narrow 51 percent margin to accept a new contract tabled by the leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union. The one-week strike had affected passenger and parcel service for most of the country west of Ottawa.

The new two-year deal reportedly includes annual wage increases of 3 percent. However, there are no improvements around other central issues in the dispute, including working conditions and the contracting out of jobs.



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