

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 June 2007

Latin America

Brazil: Bahia governor threatens to cut striking teachers' pay

More than 3,000 striking teachers met in the city of Salvador and rejected the decision by Bahia Governor Jaques Wagner to deny teachers their wages for any of the days they are on strike. Teachers in Bahia—in northeastern Brazil—also decided to continue their strike. Edenice Santana, director of the teachers' union APLB, called on students and their parents to mobilize in support of the striking teachers and denounced Governor Wagner. "He is abandoning the social base that elected him," said Santana. She warned that Wagner's intransigence could lead to the cancellation of classes for the year. The strike, over wages, is in its sixth week.

The strike began March 8 after APLB members rejected a wage offer presented to all public employees by the state legislature: 4.5 percent increase for most and 17.28 percent for all employees that make less than R\$380 (US\$200) per month. The teachers are demanding 17.28 percent for everyone. Negotiators for Brazil's Workers' Central Union (CUT) have intervened in the strike on behalf of the APLB and are insisting that Bahia authorities cancel the decision to suspend wages and drop a lawsuit against the strikers. Government negotiators are demanding that teachers return to work.

Teachers have also gone on strike in the adjacent northern state of Pernambuco. The 28,000 strikers in that state are demanding a 20 percent raise.

On the federal level, President Lula decreed a hard-line policy on public sector strikes that, in addition to discounting wages for days lost due to the strike, includes a policy of no negotiations until after the strike is over. Since he became president, Lula—a former union leader—has consistently pursued pro-business policies. Throughout the month, there have been a series of job actions by government workers, including slowdowns and strikes in various government ministries, in 43 federal universities, and at the Central Bank. The Federal Employees Union, a CUT affiliate, estimates that 95,000 employees are, or have been, involved in job actions during this period.

Sugar workers strike in São Paulo

Five sugar and ethanol plants were shut down by a strike last week in São Paulo State, Brazil's main sugar cane region. Workers no longer want the current salary structure based on the weight of sugar cane they cut. Instead, they want to be paid according to number of meters of sugar they cut—with a guaranteed minimum salary. They are also demanding an end to temporary work.

The sugar barons that control São Paulo's fields have rejected the workers' demands and have proposed to raise the per-ton rate to compensate for last year's inflation. Press reports indicate that the strike is having a significant impact on this year's sugar crop. São Paulo State is the largest sugar-producing region in the world, generating 65 percent of Brazil's total output. The cutting season that began in April was to set a record, up until the strike began.

São Paulo metro workers strike

Subway transit workers in São Paulo went on strike on Thursday, June 14, and shut down 10 subway lines. The strike caused chaos in this city, Brazil's largest. Wages were the main issue in the strike. Metro workers are demanding a real-wage hike of 10 percent, which, taking inflation into account, would mean a 13 percent increase in nominal wages. They also want the increase to be retroactive to May 1. The wage demand is substantially higher than management's offer of 4.35 percent.

Authorities estimated that the strike is responsible for a 172-kilometer gridlock in São Paulo as the city's 3 million subway users resorted to automobiles, taxis and extra buses made available by the city. The normal rush-hour gridlock is 80 kilometers.

Mexican miners divided on national strike

On June 15, the majority of coal miners in the city of La Rosita, Coahuila State, ignored a decision by the bureaucracy of the Miners and Metal Workers Union (IMMSA) to begin a strike and instead continued working. IMMSA had called for a national strike against mines and smelters owned by Grupo México, a transnational company that also owned the Pasta de Concho mine where 65 workers perished in a disaster last year.

The strike was called to demand amnesty for former union president Napoleón Gómez Urrutia who was removed from office by former Mexican President Fox and now resides in

Canada. In addition to amnesty, the union raised the issue of safety violations at the mines and smelters. Seventy-seven IMMSA members died on the job last year, including 65 at Pasta de Concho and 2 as a result of police repression in the Lázaro Cárdenas-Las Truchas steel mill in Michoacán State.

Strikes scheduled to take place in Grupo México facilities in San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Sonora were postponed until next week. According to *Universal*, a Mexico City daily, many miners thought the strike had little to do with their real concerns and that its purpose was to pressure the Calderón administration to favor one section of the union bureaucracy over another by dropping corruption charges against the former IMMSA president. Urrutía was widely disliked in the coalfields for having repeatedly signed off on the shoddy safety practices that led to the Pasta de Concho Mine disaster.

In Colombia, educators and students continue protests

On Wednesday, June 13, thousands of public educators and students demonstrated against legislation approved by Congress that will make deep budget cuts in education. During the protests in Bogotá, Popayán, and other cities, there were confrontations with police that resulted in the arrest of 42 demonstrators. The protests were the latest in a series of mobilizations and strikes against passage of the law.

Congress and President Alvaro Uribe ignored the mass opposition and approved it anyway. The education unions are campaigning for a referendum to repeal the legislation. Union leader Raúl Arroyave indicated that 160,000 people have signed the petition for the referendum that would defend health and education from the budget axe.

United States

Houston Kroger workers give seven-day strike notice

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) issued a seven-day strike notice to Houston, Texas-area Kroger stores on June 15. The UFCW is the bargaining agent for 12,700 Kroger workers in the Houston area. Workers voted to grant strike authorization last month, after working without a contract since March. One of the main issues in the dispute is payments to the health benefit trust fund that is jointly administered by Kroger and the UFCW. Last year, union and management representatives imposed a benefit cut on Kroger workers because of a cash shortfall.

Meanwhile, Kroger meat cutters in Dallas, who are negotiating separately, agreed to a “cooling-off” period following the expiration of a contract extension. Two years ago, 6,800 Kroger cashiers in Houston were saddled by the UFCW with a four-year contract that forces them to pay partial healthcare premiums for the first time.

Contract talks are continuing between Kroger and the UFCW in Seattle, Los Angeles and Toledo, Ohio.

Glass workers walk out in Indiana

Workers at Dlubak Corp. facilities in Blairsville and Freeport, Indiana, struck June 15 after rejecting a contract proposal endorsed by their union, United Steelworkers (USWA) Local 1537-06.

Dublak is a supplier of thick ballistic glass utilized to upgrade Humvees and other US combat vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan. The company responded to the walkout by taking out ads for strikebreakers. Company officials said they were surprised by the strike, since they had agreed to all the union’s contract terms. However, rank-and-file workers voted by an 80-65 margin to reject the deal.

Workers at the facility have been on six- and seven-day schedules since Christmas. They were reportedly angered by the inadequate wage increase negotiated by the USWA. Wages currently average just \$12 an hour.

Canada

Deal reached in Labrador mine strike

A two-month-old strike by support workers at Voisey’s Bay metal mine in northern Labrador may be over after a tentative deal was reached last week between the United Steelworkers and employers. Around 120 workers employed by two different companies at the mine, including maintenance and housekeeping workers, went on strike in the middle of April for wage improvements and for contract dates that coincide with regular workers at the nickel mine—one of the largest in the world.

Several incidents provoked by the use of replacement workers inflamed tensions during the strike, eliciting a hollow promise from the Newfoundland government to outlaw scabs.



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