

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 July 2007

University strike in Uruguay

Non-teaching employees of the University of the Republic went on strike last Wednesday. The strike ended on Friday after the nation's chamber of deputies approved a US\$10 million wage hike, though some departments did not go back to work. The strikers warned that the strike would resume if the Senate, which has to endorse the lower house's decision, tampers with the wage legislation.

Alfredo Abelando, leader of the University of the Republic Employees Association (AFFUR,) told *El País* newspaper that a series of 24-hour strikes by employees at some academic departments would continue. On Monday, there will be strikes in the Veterinary School, on Tuesday at the Science Department, on Wednesday at the Law School and the Department of Social Sciences, on Thursday at the School of Architecture, and on Friday at the Department of Economics and Administration.

Abelando will lobby Uruguayan senators and tell them that a US\$10 million appropriation for employees' wages is good but insufficient.

Peruvian president declares state of emergency after confrontation with striking teachers

Following a confrontation of teachers and other workers with Peruvian President Alan García, the government declared a 15-day state of emergency in the city of Pucallpa in Peru's Amazon region.

In the city of Ayavirí, striking teachers pelted García with eggs. The president had referred to the strikers as "leisure lovers." The teachers are protesting draft legislation that would make it easier for the government to sack teachers, using poor performance as a pretext. The strikers also surrounded the Juliaca Airport and held García's plane hostage, forcing the president to return to Lima on a military helicopter.

The state of emergency suspends civil rights and permits arbitrary arrests. The government measure was in response to a civic strike organized by Pucallpa residents last Tuesday to protest legislation that would end existing tax exemptions for the region's inhabitants. On that day, thousands of demonstrators stoned a police station, demanding the release of 14 of the strikers.

On Saturday, a Puno teacher wrote an open letter to the president. The letter accuses García of representing the interests of capitalists and landlords. It points out that 40 percent of Puno children are malnourished and that unemployment is

rampant in the region. The letter declares that none of the workers and poor people of Puno are "leisure lovers," and that the real lovers of leisure are government ministers and legislators who squeeze exorbitant salaries from the sweat of workers. The letter also indicates that Peru invests less than 3 percent of GDP in education, much less than European countries.

In comments to the press on Saturday, García minimized the protests in Puno and the Amazon. He accused radical elements in the teachers' union of obstructing so-called education reform—legislation that would force teachers to undergo evaluations that would result in the sacking of thousands of teachers—and gave assurances that the country's economy is sound and growing. There is increasing alarm among government circles and the media over the protests and strikes taking place. Fearing a social explosion, some have called on the president to carry out more-conciliatory policies.

Chile: national strike by copper miners

Last Thursday, striking "contract" copper miners briefly occupied the smelter Radomiro Tomic in northern Chile. They abandoned the occupation shortly thereafter as a sign of readiness to negotiate, according to Andrés Leal, who heads the National Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC). The mobilization was part of a national strike by thousands of contract workers against the state-owned National Copper Corporation (CODELCO.)

The workers, employed by CODELCO subcontractors, are demanding equal rights with workers employed directly by CODELCO. They are demanding a productivity bonus, that the company honor previous agreements and comply with the law.

In a press conference, Leal declared that a year of negotiations with CODELCO has produced nothing, that the company has broken promises and that the unequal treatment has gotten worse. "Thousands of workers across the country feel cheated and defrauded both by the President (Michelle Bachelet) and by CODELCO for not fulfilling what they promised." He added that CTC members have no alternative other than exercising their right to strike.

Workers have mobilized CODELCO Norte, Salvador, Ventanas, Andina and El Teniente—the world's largest underground copper mine.

At El Teniente, there were violent incidents as workers fought police. Buses and a company office were set on fire. Fifty miners were arrested. Two thirds of CODELCO's miners are

contract workers.

New York construction workers clash with police, nonunion workers on picket line

Seven workers were arrested and two taken to the hospital as a protest by construction workers against a contractor's use of nonunion labor at a Midtown Manhattan construction site boiled over on June 29. After a nonunion driver ran into a picket, workers locked arms to prevent the truck from leaving the site.

The union for construction workers claims they were forced off the construction site by Times Square Construction and replaced by nonunion workers, while the contractor claims workers walked off the job. The protest has been simmering for more than a month while charges have been filed with the National Labor Relations Board.

Wall Street Journal reporters protest takeover by billionaire

Some 200 *Wall Street Journal* reporters stayed away from work June 28 to protest a takeover by media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch reached an agreement with the *Journal's* parent company Dow Jones that includes an agreement providing for a nominal "independent" editorial board to "protect" the current right-wing editorial proclivities.

The job action was the second by union workers at the *Journal*, who earlier held a one-day action to protest cuts in healthcare coverage and attacks on salaries. *Journal* reporters have been working since March without a contract.

Tampa mayor axes jobs

The administration of Tampa Mayor Pam Isorio eliminated 236 jobs as the city reacts to reduced property taxes. The reductions combined 115 vacant positions with the jobs of 121 workers who are currently working, resulting in a \$15 million savings for the city.

The city also wiped out 133 part-time jobs to save an additional \$1 million. No severance pay is being offered to any workers affected by the cuts. Meanwhile, none of Isorio's staff will lose their jobs. Isorio, a Democrat, is considering a bid for the US Senate.

Clerical workers vote for strike authorization

More than 200 members of Southern California Local 63 Office Clerical Unit (OCU) of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) voted unanimously to grant strike authorization power June 29 after months of fruitless negotiation efforts.

Preliminary negotiations began in April with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). The OCU is an offshoot of the local's marine clerk unit and comprises office workers who facilitate the movement of container cargo in and out of the Long Beach/Los Angeles Harbor.

Assembled on short notice, members were given an update by OCU President John Fageaux. Outstanding issues include health and welfare, the formation of a union/management "trust," wages and pensions.

Fageaux fielded questions, after which he called out the names of each of nearly 20 PMA member companies with which the OCU has contracts—including such giants as China Shipping, Matson, APL and Yang Ming—for a voice vote on strike authorization.

The pay rate for experienced office clericals is more than \$40 per hour (temps earn in the mid-\$30/hour range, but without full-timers' benefits), along with health and other benefits that are out of reach for most workers in the US today. Management is chafing to replicate the successful attacks that the PMA carried out against union dockworkers in 2002.

Using a combination of provocations, lockouts and lawsuits, as well as "national security" and "war on terror" threats made by the Bush administration—with the tacit approval of the Democrats—the PMA gained a number of concessions: introduction of technologies that resulted in the elimination of 1,000 jobs; an arbitration system for new jobs that opened the door for the introduction of nonunion workers in some areas; a two-tiered system in which younger workers would get worse wages and conditions as older workers retired.

The final contract was the result of closed-door meetings between AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka and PMA representatives.

Though the OCU is relatively small compared to the longshore section, it has grown apace with the technological changes like containerization, computerization and instantaneous communication and information transmission that have swept through the shipping industry in recent years.

Oregon union bureaucrat submits \$110,000 back-pay request

Joe DiNicola, president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503, submitted a request for 2,500 hours of overtime, amounting to \$110,000, to augment his \$83,000 annual salary. DiNicola filed a suit with the Oregon Department of Revenue to recover his pay demand after an SEIU board rejected his request.

According to *wweek.com*, DiNicola kept records for any time he worked over 40 hours per work, including such tasks as answering e-mails. One request includes walking on a picket line for one hour in 2004 during 61-day strike by union members making \$11 an hour.



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