

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 July 2007

Latin America

Peru: class tensions at a boiling point as teachers strike continues

On July 11 and 12, a national strike that included teachers, construction workers, miners peasants and other workers virtually paralyzed Peru. The strike was called by the General Labor Confederation (CGT) in support of the teachers and demanded economic equality.

The government of President Alan García continues to take repressive measures against Peruvian workers. State authorities have issued arrests lists for 100 striking teachers, including the union leadership. Last week, government security forces arrested leaders of the striking teachers and confronted street protests.

On that day, police attacked a march by 7,000 striking workers; the police had provocatively arrested union leader Robert Huaynalaya as the marchers assembled. Strikers blocked city streets and the road to the airport. According to one report three workers may have been killed and 100 arrested. Confrontations are taking place across the country, particularly in the 16 regions in which the teachers strike is active.

Three hundred thousand Peruvian public school teachers launched a national strike July 5. The Peruvian United Educator's Union (SUTEP) is opposed to a new education law that makes it easier for the government to sack teachers and break up the teachers' union by using the pretext of higher national educational standards.

The most violent clashes have taken place in southern Peru, in Arequipa, Puno, Ayacucho and Cusco, where riot-equipped security forces have battled striking teachers and their supporters. Hundreds of strikers blocked the tourist train that leads to the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu last Thursday. On Saturday, hundreds of peasants marched into the southern city of Andahuaylas in support of the teachers and to protest the high price of fertilizer and fuel.

Over the weekend the SUTEP declared its willingness to lift the strike if the García administration agrees to negotiate with the teachers and stops its repression.

Brazil: Airport employees vote to suspend strike

In a divided vote on July 13, Sao Paulo airport workers decided to accept a government proposal for a 6 percent wage increase and suspend their strike threat. Only 53 percent of the workers voting accepted the proposal made by INFRAERO, the public firm that runs many of the nations' airports.

Workers at the airports in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Campinas rejected the wage offer, but agreed to abide by the majority decision. A strike this weekend would have seriously affected the Pan American Games that are being held this week in Rio de Janeiro.

Negotiations break down between Chilean miners and Bachelet government

Talks between representatives of 28,000 so-called contract miners in Chile and CODELCO, the government-owned copper corporation, broke down July 11. A CODELCO spokesperson claimed the Copper Workers Union broke an agreement to avoid violence during negotiations. It described the breaking off of talks as a postponement. On July 10 contract miners had blocked access to the Andina mine, 80 kilometers north of Santiago, paralyzing operations there. Forty workers were arrested.

United States

Lockout of California trash haulers continues

There are no new talks in the lockout by Waste Management Inc. of some 500 trash haulers in Alameda County, California. The conflict, which began July 2, involves a clash over new work rules that would give management new disciplinary powers, bar workers from honoring picket lines of other unions and prohibit strikes for the duration of the agreement.

The new work rules, called "life critical rules," would

allow the company to impose a suspension for a first violation followed by termination for a second violation. Waste Management, which operates garbage pickup services throughout the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, is currently using 350 replacement workers and spending a reported \$600,000 a day to replace locked-out members of Local 70. Last year, the Houston, Texas-based company had revenues of \$13.3 billion.

Tentative agreement in California bus strike

A tentative agreement was reached Saturday, July 14, between 1,100 bus drivers of Teamsters Local 952 and the Orange County Transportation Authority in Southern California after a week-long strike that affected 225,000 commuters. Joining the drivers were 350 bus mechanics working under a separate Teamsters contract. This was the first strike by county bus drivers in 21 years in Orange County.

Ratification meetings are taking place on Sunday and Monday. Currently drivers make from \$13.72 to \$21.42 an hour. In the new proposal, the actual increase in wages and benefits since the beginning of the strike is only one-tenth of 1 percent. Over the three-year contract period, raises for newly hired drivers will increase by 10.8 percent and for drivers with five or more years, 11.7 percent. Veteran drivers' pay will top at \$23.92, below the \$25 an hour currently earned by Los Angeles County bus drivers.

The workforce is divided under a two-tier system, where lesser paid, newly hired workers work under a split-shift system that requires long unpaid breaks in the middle of their workday. Every year, over half of the 150 new-hires quit in their first year; and half of those remaining quit by their second year. With the most senior drivers making between \$45,000 and \$60,000 a year, many still qualify for housing assistance in a county where the median home price is \$635,000.

Canada

Vancouver strike looming

Over 8,000 outside workers in the Vancouver and the lower mainland region of British Columbia are poised to strike this week after delivering a 72-hour strike notice last Wednesday. Workers involved in the dispute include garbage, road and building maintenance, sewage and other workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The union postponed a strike set to begin last Friday, saying they had not received a ruling from the Labor Relations Board as to which services would be deemed essential. A major issue in dispute is the length of the new contract. The city of Vancouver is trying to extend the agreement beyond the usual three-year term in order to push the expiration date past the end of the 2010 Olympic Games, which the city is hosting.

Firings trigger occupation at Nova Scotia rail plant

Around 50 workers in Trenton Nova Scotia occupied the guard house at TrentonWorks railcar plant last Tuesday after unionized security guards were fired and replaced by private security guards. The workers, who had until recently been employed at the plant, also blocked entrance gates to the facility for the duration of the day-long protest.

The plant in Trenton, which is owned by US-based Greenbrier, had been in operation since 1872, but the company is closing it and moving operations to Mexico, putting 300 people out of work. Workers at the plant were represented by the United Steelworkers union and the security guards were the last unionized workers still holding their jobs.



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