

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 September 2007

Latin America

Argentina: Public school teachers demand pay for strike days

Teachers in Argentina's Entre Ríos province say they will not reach an agreement with the school system unless provincial authorities set aside a government measure that would deduct pay from their salaries for the days they were on strike in July and August. Leaders of the Entre Ríos' Magisterial Union (AGMER) also demanded that teachers not be made responsible for a provincial loan from the federal Education Ministry.

Teachers in this province have carried out intermittent strikes over wages and to demand an increase in school budgets to repair buildings and construct new schools. To popularize their struggle, AGMER mobilized teachers in a caravan that traveled throughout the province. AGMER leader Sergio Elizar indicated that, despite repeated protests since 2005, the physical conditions of schools remain precarious.

Teachers strike in Paraguay

The 3,500-strong Paraguay Teachers and Education workers Association (ADOFEF) on Friday joined a strike by public school teachers that the National Educators Union (UNE) had begun on Tuesday. UNE members returned to work on Friday but plan to resume their strike on September 5 for 48 hours, repeating the same pattern each week.

The main issues in the strike are wages and the payment of social benefits that had been postponed last year. The lower chamber of Paraguay's Congress has approved a 20 percent raise for the teachers. The measure does not take into account the issue of social benefits, which is very important for the educators. Many doubt that the Senate will approve the raise, in part because Economics Minister Miguel Gómez has warned that the government cannot afford the 20 percent that the House of Deputies approved. Authorities fear that granting the teachers' demands

would encourage other government employees to press for higher wages and benefits.

Last week's strike appears to have had a limited impact in Asunción, the country's capital. In the interior regions of Lower Chaco, Paraguari and San Pedro, however, nearly 100 percent of teachers stayed off the job.

Chemical workers threaten strike in Yucatan

Chemical workers employed by the Cantarell Nitrogen Company in Ciudad del Carmen in the Mexican state of Campeche in the Yucatan Peninsula have declared that they will not accept a wage increase of less than 15 percent. Cantarell belongs to the British transnational company BOC Gas. The plant provides nitrogen gas to PEMEX, Mexico's national oil company, that is pumped underground to help push crude oil to the surface at an aging oilfield nearby.

Management tried to keep the conflict from the media and resisted negotiations until the workers threatened to walk out. The company has also run into opposition from farmers in the region, who blame it for damaging land held in common at the *ejido* San Antonio Cárdenas by laying pipe from the ocean to the plant. The ocean water is used to cool the plant's turbines.

United States

El Paso, Texas: Hunger strikers protest lack of jobs and discrimination

Nine Hispanic woman workers launched a hunger strike in El Paso, Texas on August 27 to protest a lack of jobs and discrimination against female immigrant workers. They planned to continue their protest through Labor Day. Despite retraining programs, none of the women have been able to find new employment.

Some 17,000 garment jobs were moved out of the area during the 1993-2003 period. Hunger striker Ramona Esparza, 73, who was laid off in 1994, told the *El Paso Times*, "Because of your age, they don't give you work."

Another striker, 55-year-old Maria Yolanda

Mancinas, went through two separate training programs and received diplomas as an administrative assistant and in medical equipment repair, but to no avail. “I didn’t have experience,” she said. “They all wanted at least six months experience.”

The women are members of La Mujer Obrera (The Woman Worker) and have been seeking government backing for startup businesses.

Teachers strike in Rhode Island

The attorney for the Burrillville, Rhode Island school district called on a superior court judge to order striking teachers back to work. The attorney, Ronald Cascione, said both sides remain far apart on issues such as healthcare payments and class sizes and that the strike could become “indefinite” without the intervention of the courts.

Talks broke down last week after teachers voted to begin their strike August 29 and the school district cancelled classes. Two days later, as the Labor Day holiday weekend began, Super Court Judge Netti Vogel ordered both sides to continue negotiating. Neither the union nor negotiators for the school district have revealed exact details of the talks.

If no resolution is forthcoming from this weekend’s negotiations, the court will call a hearing in the early part of the week to consider imposing a back-to-work order on the teachers. Patrick Crowley, a spokesperson for the teachers union, said the union would obey a court order.

Canada

Strikes continue in western Canada

Striking municipal workers in Vancouver, British Columbia rallied last week at City Hall to protest the glacial pace of negotiations in their battle for improved wages, pay equity for women and a freeze on contracting out provisions. Five thousand three hundred members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, organized in three locals that include garbage collectors, city clerks and daycare and library staff, have been on strike for seven weeks in one of the largest public sector actions to hit the province in several years.

Meanwhile, 8,000 striking forestry workers organized by the United Steelworkers (USW) are also entering their seventh week on strike against Forest Industrial Relations, an association representing 31 companies. The workers are fighting against attacks on shift

scheduling, overtime and severance pay.

The Vancouver city workers and coastal woodworkers could soon be joined by 1,500 Vancouver hotel workers employed at the luxurious Hyatt Regency, Westin Bayshore, Four Seasons and Renaissance Hotels who voted last week for job action should their employers fail to address pension, workload and salary issues. And in Victoria, British Columbia’s capital city, library workers have issued a strike notice to take affect September 4.

In neighboring Alberta, the construction industry faces imminent strike action by some 30,000 members of various trades that would affect every major construction project in the province.

At the same time, 400 paramedics in Calgary, Alberta are considering a response to a strike ban by the Conservative government that threatens to permanently strip them of the right to strike and significantly shifts labor relations practices in the province even further to the right.



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