Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 October 2007

Latin America

National strike in Dominican Republic

The trade unions and popular organizations that form the Alternative Social Forum (FSA) have called for a national protest strike this Tuesday and intend to carry it out despite warnings by the National Police and the Armed Forces that they are prepared to repress the work stoppage.

The purpose of the strike is to protest deteriorating living standards for the vast majority of Dominicans. More concretely, the FSA is demanding an increase in wages for all, a decent public transit system, lower fuel prices, the freezing of prices for items that compose the family breadbasket, available credit for small businesses, and an end to unjust evictions.

Last week, the National Police announced plans to deploy 30,000 police agents to "keep the peace." A police spokesperson also declared that five water cannon trucks will be used against the strikers.

On July 9, the police attacked a demonstration of striking workers, killed two and left many wounded.

Mexican chemical firm threatens to shut down

The Tekchem Company of Guanajuato state, currently shut down by a strike, declared last week that it would cease operations after the union that represents Teckhem workers rejected management's proposal that workers give up wages and working conditions above the minimum mandated by law. Tekchem produces fertilizers and insecticides used in agriculture.

The workers, members of the National Chemical and Petrochemical Workers Union, rejected management's proposal and went on strike September 21, a week after the company began proceedings to cancel the existing contract, move veteran workers from the plant and force them to reapply for their jobs under a new contract.

Colombia considered the most dangerous country for union militants

A report released in Brussels on September 17 by the International Trade Union Confederation indicates that, out of 138 countries surveyed, Colombia continues to lead in the number of assassinated trade union militants. Seventy-eight were executed by death squads in 2006, eight more than in 2005.

The numbers do not include those that were threatened or kidnapped and whose fate is unknown. The ITUC report described the government of Alvaro Uribe as "more interested in public relations than in confronting the real problem."

In addition, the report presents evidence that government officials have been involved in the assassinations. Information leaked to the ITUC by an informant in Colombia's Department of State Security (DAS) shows that the agency provided information to right-wing death squads on at least 23 union militants, most of whom were later executed.

Among those killed were Jose Grigorio Izquierdo, a public service union leader, Daniel Cortez Cortez, an electrician, and farmers José Mario Guerrero Garzón and Hector Jairo Yate.

Elsewhere in Latin America, the report declares, violations of trade union rights include illegal jailing of strikers and employer attacks on workers trying to sign up others to unions. It denounced the killing of two metal workers in Mexico in 2006 as a direct result of the use of "disproportionate" force against striking workers at the Lázaro Cárdenas steel mill in Michoacán state.

In all, the ITUC confirmed that at least 144 trade unionists were assassinated across the world. The Philippines, with 33 executions, was second to Colombia. In that nation, the ITUC report declared that the 33 workers were "killed in an orgy of political violence" with direct involvement of the state. Worldwide, it estimated that 800 workers were injured or tortured. No figures were reported on Iraq or Afghanistan.

United States

California nurses strike over benefits and job security

About 1,000 nurses at a hospital in Pomona, California, launched a five-day strike September 26 after the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and hospital management failed to reach an agreement over healthcare benefits and job security. Negotiators for the Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center offered a three-year contract with annual wage increases of 5, 4 and 4 percent, but nurses want job security, pay based on years of professional experience, an upward shift of top-scale wages and an adjustment of patient-to-staff ratios.

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The two sides began negotiating in April, and last August the hospital made an offer rejected by nurses that led to a one-day work stoppage. Hospital spokeswoman Kathy Roche termed the union's demands as "economically and financially unreasonable."

In an effort to restart negotiations, the union has withdrawn the demand for paid family healthcare benefits for nurses with fewer than 10 years of service at the hospital. But the concession does not seem to have moved management. Currently, the hospital has brought in 120 contract nurses in an attempt to break the strike. Nurses have dedicated their walkout to a fellow nurse struggling against a recurrence of cancer who was terminated by the hospital after having used up all her available leave from work.

City administrator launches attack on worker's free speech rights

A Public Works administrator for the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, issued a reprimand to a city worker for criticisms leveled against city council members at a September 18 meeting. Steve Leach, the administrator, charged that the remarks made by Stephen West, an equipment operator, were "extremely unprofessional" and, "Additional instances of such conduct will lead to additional disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from city employment."

The two council members who were the target of West's criticisms denied asking Leach to issue such a reprimand. The SEIU has charged that the reprimand violates West's First Amendment rights and filed a grievance over the issue.

Illinois manufacturer requests permit to build onsite housing for strikebreakers

A Rockford, Illinois, foundry has issued a request to the city to build housing facilities on its manufacturing premises for potential strikebreakers in the event contract talks with the United Auto Workers (UAW) break down and a strike ensues. The UAW and negotiators for Indiana-based Accuride Corp. will begin contract talks on or near October 10 over wages and working conditions for 136 workers at the company's subsidiary plant in Rockford that operates under the name Gunite Corp.

"While we don't anticipate that there will be a strike, we feel that preparing for that possibility is prudent and will assure that we are able to meet our customer needs," said an Accuride company spokesman. UAW Local 718 president Richard Kardell said the company brought stacks of cots into the factory about two and a half years ago before the previous round of contract talks.

Canada

Alberta postal wildcat

Rural and suburban mail carriers in northern Alberta organized by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) staged a wildcat strike September 24 to protest attempts by Canada Post to bypass established negotiating commitments in order to promulgate two-tier wage settlements in the postal sector. The wildcat came on the heels of a one-week wildcat strike by carpenters and other construction trades in the Alberta oil patch who were protesting against restrictions on their own right to strike.

In the letter carriers' dispute, Canada Post had offered wage raises to select sections of the mail carriers in an effort to pit urban and rural workers against each other. The rural and suburban letter carriers were only recently organized by CUPW under a contract promoted by the union leadership that signed away the right to strike for eight years.

Striking Vancouver city workers to vote

About 7,000 striking City of Vancouver outside and inside municipal workers have been instructed by the local leaders of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to prepare to vote this week on non-binding recommendations handed down by an appointed mediator. The leaderships of CUPE Local 1004, which organizes outside employees including garbage collectors, CUPE Local 391, which represents library workers, and CUPE Local 15, which organizes administrative and support staff, all agreed last week to present submissions to mediator Brian Foley in an effort to bring to a close a strike that began on July 20.

In the midst of a mini-boom in the area spurred by preparations for the 2010 Winter Olympics to be staged in nearby Whistler, British Columbia, workers have been demanding wage settlements commensurate with deals reached by similar sections of workers in the surrounding area.

Previous municipal worker contracts have been for three years. New contracts with a similar lifespan would expire in the midst of the Olympic year, which would give the union locals additional bargaining power. The union leaderships say they are willing to discuss a four-year deal, but claim that the mayor and right-wing-led city council refuse to agree to this concession, instead offering increased benefit and wage considerations.

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