

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 December 2007

## Latin America

### **Chile: University professors to strike**

Academicians at Chile's Austral University in Valdivia voted to strike over their wage demands. The professors are demanding a 10 percent raise for the first year of the contract, 7 percent above what was offered by university negotiators. The professors have also rejected a university proposal for the evaluation of professors.

University President Victor Cubillos has asked the government to impose a five-day cooling-off period beginning this Tuesday. Cubillos is of the opinion that an agreement can be reached within that period.

### **Panama: Striking public health doctors revise their demands**

Panamanian public health doctors, on strike since November 5, lowered their pay demands and added a demand that the government increase the public health budget.

The union representing the 5,000 striking doctors lowered their wage demand from a 60 percent increase down to 33 percent. However, the government is still offering only a 20 percent raise. Ongoing negotiations have yet to produce an agreement. Nevertheless, union leaders announced that they are considering suspending the strike.

The strikers are also demanding that the government provide free medical care; currently families collectively pay US\$250 million in Social Security fees for medical care.

### **Union bureaucracy abandons striking court employees in Peru**

Eduardo Rengifo, general secretary of the Judiciary Workers Federation (FTPJ), called on striking workers to return to their jobs. The administration of President Alan Garcia has threatened to dock strikers' salaries if their job action continues.

FTPJ leaders met last week and declared an end to the strike despite opposition from the ranks. "The laws are clear, a day of no work is a day of no pay," said Rengifo, "For that reason, I call on everyone to obey the decision to suspend the strike."

### **Ecuador: president threatens resignation over Constitutional Assemblies investigation**

Rafael Correa, Ecuador's social-democratic president, threatened to resign if the country's Constituent Assembly insists on investigating the repression of a popular protest against an oil company.

"If the Assembly insists on governing the country, I will resign," said Correa. The president declared that he would consider the decision a "stab in the back." The inquiry was announced by the assembly's president, Alberto Acosta—a member of Correa's political party—to look into the repression of workers and residents last June.

On June 28, Ecuadorian soldiers and police officers entered the

oil-producing region of Indo Central and attacked residents of 26 communities who were protesting the refusal of a Chinese oil company to honor its promise to employ local residents. Police and soldiers attacked indiscriminately, breaking in into people's homes and injuring 19.

Correa, who convened the Constituent Assembly as part of his call for "21st century socialism in Ecuador," defended the June attacks. Declaring, "We need to enforce the law," the president denounced the protesters, charging them with using dynamite and threatening violence to force the closure of oil wells. He rejected charges that human rights violations had taken place.

### **Mexican cane cutters continue strike for wage increase**

Sugar cane cutters, members of the National Farm Workers Confederation (CNC), are in the fourth week of a strike against the Quesería Sugar Mill in Colima state. The strikers are demanding an 8.5 percent increase in wages. Sugar cane companies have offered 4 percent. The strike has caused the loss of 75,000 tons of sugar and is affecting 15,000 cane cutters and their families.

## United States

### **Bison Food workers ratify pact, ending Buffalo strike**

A four-day strike by 140 workers at the West Seneca, New York, Bison Food plant ended December 6 when workers vote 80 percent in favor to ratify a four-year agreement. Teamsters Local 264 represents the workers at the plant, located just outside Buffalo. After a one-month contract extension expired in November 2007, workers rejected company demands for increased medical cost contributions and approved strike action.

Bison is part of the Cheektowaga-based Upstate Niagara Cooperative, with plants in Niagara Falls, Batavia and Cheektowaga in addition to West Seneca. The dairy products cooperative has about 1,000 employees and annual sales of about \$500 million. The company is a major producer of yogurt, dips and other dairy products. Local 264 represents another 160 workers at the Niagara Falls facility. Their contract does not expire until January 2008 and was not part of the strike.

Local 254 Business Agent Ed McDonald explained some details of the new four-year contract. Under the old contract, new-hires started at \$14.50 per hour peak, matching the \$16.50 hourly wages of senior workers in a few years. The new contract provides wage increases totaling \$2.15 over four years.

"We are the highest paid dairy workers in the area," McDonald stated. Workers hired within the last two years currently pay 7 percent of medical premiums; that will phase down to 5 percent. New employees will pay 5 percent of premiums to start and will switch to a \$5.00 per week contribution in the fourth year of the new agreement. Senior workers, who have been fully covered, will pay the new \$5.00 per week premium in the fourth year. In recent

local press release, McDonald stated, "It's a bottomless pit in contributions to health care."

The 5 percent contribution might appear minimal until one examines the annual rates of increase in medical insurance premiums. These rates are scheduled to rise anywhere from 10 to 25 percent for the 2008 health insurance enrollment season when the majority of employers and employees sign up for their family or individual health coverage through Independent Health, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Western New York and Univera Healthcare. These rates can potentially skyrocket over the next three years.

Healthy Choice New York is being priced out of reach as a low-income health plan for individuals and families with no employer coverage. Premiums will increase from \$187.03 to \$229.13 per month for individual coverage, with a prescription plan that excludes any preexisting conditions for 12 months.

The issue of drastically reducing or eliminating company medical benefits for workers has been a focal point of recent labor struggles. The Buffalo Federation of Teachers (BFT) has disputed the move by the school board to move to a single insurance carrier as a violation of their contract. The recent UAW collaboration with GM, Ford and the Chrysler Group in forming Voluntary Beneficiary Employment Associations (VEBA) threatens retirees with the loss of medical coverage and massive co-pays for new workers.

#### **California building inspector strike halts construction**

Striking building inspectors in San Jose, California expanded their picket lines December 6 from City Hall to construction sites for a downtown high-rise condominium and an EBay office, resulting in the shutdown of the projects. San Jose city officials reacted angrily and threatened legal action against the Association of Building, Mechanical and Electrical Inspectors, which represents the strikers. Employee Relations Director Alex Gurza called the move by strikers "a very serious escalation."

The strike, which began November 29, was sparked by the city's insistence that only police and firefighters can appeal disciplinary issues to an arbitrator, whereas inspectors must take their cases before the Civil Service Commission. But inspectors don't trust the city council-appointed commission, believing it is unfair. Instead they want outside arbitration to rule on issues such as firings.

It is estimated that the 90 inspectors currently carry out 400 to 500 daily inspections and the city has been finding it difficult to cope during the strike. When picketing expanded last Thursday to construction sites many construction workers honored the picket lines, further impeding construction in the city.

#### **Workers at Minnesota pork processing plant fall ill to immune disorder**

Eleven workers who worked in the same department at an Austin, Minnesota pork processing plant have been diagnosed with a rare immune disorder that affects nerves and produces numbness and weakness in the arms and legs. Called chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, or CIDP, the disease can leave permanent damage.

The afflicted workers performed tasks in the same area of the Quality Pork Processors plant that involved cutting meat from pig's heads and using compressed air to expel brain matter from

the skulls. Nurses at the slaughterhouse first noticed the symptoms in December of 2006 and they persisted through July of this year.

In late October, doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota reported their findings to the Health Department. The Health Department officials recommended the company shut down the air compressor and workers were issued goggles and sleeves to wear over their arms. Only last week did the state publicly reveal the development.

Dr. Suraj Muley, an expert on CIDP at the University of Minnesota, recommended that the Austin Pork plant be closed. Muley, who is not part of the investigation, fears that if the problem is an infectious agent, other workers might be at risk.

State Health Commissioner Sanne Magnan opposed a shutdown, claiming, "All of the information we have to date indicates that the general public is not at increased risk for developing this type of illness." Sandy Forstner at the Austin Chamber of Commerce echoed this position, declaring, Quality Pork "is vital to our economy. Everybody has to be cautious, but we also have to find out what it is without overreacting."

Quality Pork Processors employs about 1,300 workers at its Austin plant. It provides pork for Austin-based Hormel Foods and was spun off from the company in 1989. It was the site of the bitter 1985-86 strike by United Food and Commercial Workers Local P9. In 2005 Hormel generated an estimated \$280 million in revenues.

#### **Canada**

#### **Toronto area bar staff strike**

One hundred-eighty bartenders and wait staff at three locations north of Toronto, Ontario went on strike last week against concessions being demanded by their employer, the Woodbine Entertainment Group.

The striking workers are employed at the Woodbine and Mohawk Racetracks at the Greenwood Teletheatre and are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

#### **Newfoundland hotel workers strike**

Banquet staff and other workers at a St. John's hotel went on strike last week in a pre-Christmas bid for a new contract.

The workers are fighting for improvements in wages and benefits against their employer, hotel giant Holiday Inn. The 60 workers are members of the CAW and have been without a contract since last August.



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