

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 January 2008

Latin America

Death threats in Santiago bus operators strike

Leaders of the Lotrans trade union that represents striking bus operators employed by Subus, a private contractor for the Transantiago public transit network, announced on January 26 that they have received death threats. Subus drivers went on strike January 4 demanding improved wages and working conditions.

“The problem is that after we began the strike asking for a 70,000 peso wage hike we confronted a series of anti-union measures from the company,” said Lotrans leader Fernando Lorca Fortunatti. Among the illegal measures were withholding strikers’ December wages, telephone threats to strikers and psychological abuse.

He pointed out that the Labor Department has confirmed that the company is acting illegally but that management is not likely to be deterred by Labor Department sanctions and that company officials have threatened to “destroy the union.”

Initially the strike involved 120 operators, but following company threats only 24, including Fortunatti, remain on strike. Following the death threats the remaining strikers considered asking for asylum at the Venezuelan embassy in Santiago.

Brazil president attacks the right to strike

On January 21 Brazilian President Lula sent draft legislation to Congress that would discount the wages of striking workers. The legislation is a response by the Lula administration to a possible strike by public employees, who are demanding a wage increase.

Last year, Lula proposed similar legislation, declaring that “a strike cannot be like a holiday.”

For their part, 770,000 government workers insist that the government fulfill its promise to increase wages. Economic authorities are considering suspending already agreed upon wage increases as part of a budget adjustment in the wake of a congressional vote against a proposed US\$20 billion tax increase.

Puerto Rican teachers to strike

The Puerto Rican Teachers Federation (FMPR) announced January 23 that 20,000-25,000 public school teachers out of 42,000 on the island are ready to strike February 1.

The Department of Education’s press director Charo Meléndez interpreted the figure as a repudiation of the strike.

Meanwhile the FMPR is busy establishing three-person strike committees across the country. Its goal is to have 800 committees by the beginning of the strike. The committees would coordinate the picketing and public relations in their regions in the event of a strike.

The FMPR was decertified on January 8 as the teachers’ representative by Puerto Rico’s Committee Labor Relations for the Public Sector (CRTSP.) The decertification was based on the pretext that the union violated anti-strike laws for public employees by organizing the strike.

The CRTSP’s decision may prevent the union from using its strike fund in the event of a walkout. It also bars the Department of Education from collecting dues for the union. FMPR leaders claim that until the courts decide on the legality of the decertification, the Department of Education may not block the union from using its strike fund or from collecting dues.

United States

Democrats refuse to support bargaining rights for Virginia public employees

Democrats in the Virginia legislature refused to vote for a measure put forward by one of their members calling for collective bargaining rights for state and local employees in the right-to-work state, after Republicans surprised them by bringing it to the house floor.

The Democrats expected the bill to die in committee, without coming to the floor of the legislature for a vote, thus allowing them to posture as defenders of public workers without recording a vote. But a house rule allowed Republican Speaker William Howell to go

over the head of committees and bring the bill to the floor despite the committee's refusal to support the measure.

Once the bill came to the floor of the legislature, Democrats refused to either debate or vote on the measure. Republicans, voting alone, defeated it 57-0. Howell continued his humiliation of Democrats by invoking an obscure rule requiring all legislators present in their seats to record a vote. Howell went down the rolls and when Democrats refused to cast a vote, he recorded them as against the bill. After requesting votes from 25 Democrats he halted, leaving the final vote as 82-0.

Drivers strike West Virginia beer distributor

Teamsters members at a beer distributor operating in Beech Bottom, West Virginia walked out on strike January 21 over health and welfare benefits. The six members of Teamsters Local 697 are pressuring Waldorf Distributing to offer benefits similar to other Teamsters drivers, warehouse workers and clerks in the area.

Waldorf has countered that making the concession would result in a 75 percent increase in benefit costs for the company. The two sides have been involved in negotiations since last July and met up through January 19.

Canada

Auto workers occupy plant as company closes

Workers at the Kitchener, Ontario plant of Ledco Ltd., which produces auto parts and packaging materials, occupied the company's facility last weekend after it closed its doors and gave notice of termination to employees.

Virtually all of the 65 workers employed by the company, 37 of which are union members, took part in the occupation in a bid to win severance pay, barricading the building and parking lot on Strasburg Road on the outskirts of Kitchener. The occupation was sanctioned by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), which had previously rejected company demands for a 25 percent cut in wages and benefits and which have said the occupation will continue until an agreement is reached for severance pay to the laid-off workers.

The company, which once employed over 100, has said it cannot compete due to the rise in the Canadian dollar over the past year.



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