

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 February 2008

Latin America

Armored truck drivers strike in Brazil

Armored truck drivers in Paraná state, Brazil, walked off their jobs last Thursday. The drivers supply funds to banks and automatic teller machines across the region. A spokesperson for the Paraná Security Employees Union (SVP) indicated that most ATMs need to be supplied with funds every 24 hours. Beginning this week, bank customers would have to form long lines at the banks to withdraw money and make deposits.

The 1,300 striking drivers are demanding a 5 percent raise over the current rate of consumer price inflation.

Puerto Rican teachers' strike appears imminent

On January 9, Puerto Rican Teachers Union (FMPR) members overwhelmingly voted to strike. The strike vote was a consequence of the government's refusal over 27 months to negotiate a new contract. The administration of Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá took the opportunity in the wake of the vote to decertify the union, claiming that it has violated laws that prohibit public employees from striking.

Last Wednesday, however, Vilá, in an attempt to forestall a confrontation with the teachers and their supporters, offered a \$150 wage increase that would bring a beginning teacher's salary to \$17,500 a year and promised legislation that would set teachers' monthly salaries at \$3,000. In response, FMPR leaders placed a question mark over the governor's promises and indicated that there are other issues that must be negotiated in addition to salaries.

Teachers point out that the Department of Education has, over the last three years, stripped them of basic rights, including the right to assemble in school property. They also report that school authorities constantly watch militant teachers and students that support them.

Rafael Feliciano, leader of the FMPR, declared last week that a larger-than-expected number of strike committees had been formed to conduct the teachers

strike. Feliciano spoke at the hall of the Brotherhood of Non-teaching Employees of the University of Puerto Rico. Representatives of labor and civic organizations that have formed a Committee to Support the Teachers Strike and Defend Public Schools surrounded him. Leaders of the committee pledged to actively participate in the teachers' struggle.

The committee, which includes the powerful Electrical Workers Union and the Puerto Rican Independence Party, called for a mass protest on February 17 and declared that it would set up soup kitchens for the striking teachers.

United States

Federal government lets mine owners off the hook on fines

The Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) confirmed last month it failed to fine mine operators for 4,000 violations over the last six years despite federal laws that specify assessment of a monetary penalty.

A review of the December 2005 Harlan County, Kentucky, underground mine death of Bud Harris led to the discovery that the mine operator, H&D, had never paid a fine for violations involved in the incident. Harris's legs were severed when a coal car ran into him and he subsequently bled to death. H&D was cited for not properly training the on-site foreman to perform the critical basic first aid that is needed before a miner is transported out of a mine to receive medical care.

Michigan school district to require teachers to reapply for jobs

The superintendent of the Grand Rapids schools has announced a plan that will force some 250 high school teachers to reapply for their jobs. The Michigan Education Association (MEA) declared the move "a flat-out assault on our members' rights." The plan is considered unprecedented for a complete school district.

The restriction plan is aimed at scapegoating teachers for the deterioration of education in Grand Rapids

schools, four of which were cited for not meeting federal testing goals. Principals will be given a say in the selection of teachers. School management claims teachers will not lose their jobs, and those not selected will be given assignments elsewhere.

The MEA's opposition to the move is based solely on the fact that they were not given a role in formulating the plan. MEA Communications Director Doug Pratt criticized the superintendent for not "even having a conversation with the teachers." School Superintendent Bernard Taylor cited 2006 contract language agreed to by the MEA that permits the district to require teachers to reapply for their jobs.

Canada

Lockout of support staff by Saskatchewan government union continues

Sixty support staff working for the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU) have been locked out since the beginning of November 2007. Negotiations between the workers' union, Local 481 of the Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, and the SGEU have been going on for two and a half years. Improved pensions and benefits are the main points of contention.

Recently, strikers filed to have their employing union suspended from membership in the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour.

Kawartha Lakes city workers strike

Four hundred inside and outside municipal workers in the Ontario town of Kawartha Lakes have been on strike for just over a week. According to statements by the workers' union, Local 855 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the main issues are the municipality's expansion of contracting out, benefits for older workers, overtime pay for snowplow operators, and wage increases to a level comparable with the wages received by city workers in nearby Peterborough. For its part, the municipality insists that it has made its final offer.



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