

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 February 2008

## Latin America

### Brazil: public health doctors strike over wages

On February 14, doctors in Amazonas state in northeast Brazil began a strike demanding that wages be increased from R\$3,100 to R\$7,500. The Amazonian Doctors' Union (SMA) reported that more than 3,000 doctors joined the strike on its first day, 40 percent of all public health doctors.

The municipality of Manaus, the capital city of Amazonas, employs most of the striking doctors.

### University strikes in Mexico

Strikes took place last week in several public universities, including campuses in the states of Mexico, San Luis Potosi, Cordoba, Tabasco, Puebla and Campeche. Jorge Meneses, secretary of the Independent Union of Academicians of Chapingo University, near Mexico City, declared that negotiations are at an impasse because of the government's refusal to raise its wage offer.

### Salmon workers on strike in Chile

Last Saturday employees of two fish farms in southern Chile suspended their occupations, but vowed to continue striking to press their wage demands. They made the decision under threat of a confrontation with the police. The workers announced that they would continue manning barricades along the highway that connects Puerto Montt and Pargua with the Island of Chiloe.

The strike began last Monday when workers occupied a trout farm owned by Aguas Claras, a subsidiary of AquaChile. The job action was followed by the occupation of the AquaChile salmon farm near Puerto Montt by some 1,000 workers. Puerto Montt is 1,000 kilometers south of Santiago. The workers, who earn a little over US\$800 a month, had rejected a 5.6 percent wage offer. Workers point out that cost-of-living increases have resulted in a 35 to 40 percent drop in the buying power of their wages.

AquaChile is the world's third largest salmon

producer; Chile is the world's second largest salmon producer after Norway. In addition to the AquaChile plant, salmon workers had also occupied five other plants.

### Construction workers protest in Panama

A protest demonstration by construction workers in Panama last week resulted in union leader Al Aromi Smith being shot dead by the police and hundreds arrested. On Saturday, the Amalgamated Construction Workers Union (SUNTRACS) announced that protests would continue. SUNTRACS leaders also threatened strike action.

The main demand raised at the demonstration was for tighter government enforcement of safety standards. Last year 25 construction workers died as a result of on-the-job injuries.

This week, construction workers plan a mass distribution of flyers to raise public awareness. A massive demonstration is set for Tuesday when Smith will be buried.

## United States

### Illinois bus drivers protest privatization and lack of union rights

School bus drivers in Carpentersville, Illinois held informational pickets February 15 outside Unit District 300 offices to protest the refusal of the school's new private bus contractor to negotiate.

The school district, which is located just northwest of Chicago, privatized the bus service, hiring Durham School Services. The school board anticipated the change would save more than \$2.1 million in retirement benefits.

At this point, the picketing is voluntary and not during driving hours. But workers indicated a strike was possible. "If things don't change and we don't get action from Durham, this is one of our alternatives," bus driver Russ Harris told the *Daily Herald*.

### Workers picket Indiana metal processor

Members of the International Union of Operating

Engineers Local 150 set up picket lines at Levy Company plants in Indiana Harbor and Burns Harbor, Indiana charging unfair labor practices by the company, which performs metal reclamation and processes slag. The suit charges Levy with threatening to rehire Local 150 members at lower pay and lower work classifications.

The Operating Engineers struck Levy back in 2005 and the company countered by hiring temporary workers. In 2006, after negotiations failed, Levy converted the temporary workers to permanent replacements. On February 8 of this year, the National Labor Relations Board announced that the replacement workers had voted overwhelming to decertify Local 150.

Levy has maintained that the decertification means Local 150 does not have a legal right to picket. An agreement the company made with the NLRB stipulated that it would not threaten to hire workers at a lower pay rate or in a lower classification and further declared that the company would bargain in good faith with the union.

### **Long Island supermarket workers in work action**

Supermarket workers at seven King Kullen stores in Long Island, New York engaged in a work action on Sunday, walking out in four-hour shifts and then returning to work. The 371 employees represented by the Commercial Workers Union Local 342 have been working without a contract since October. The union has maintained that the company is seeking to reduce pension and medical benefits, as well as eliminate contractual language that protects the workers from layoffs.

The supermarket chain has 51 stores including 45 on Long Island. There was also a walkout at five Staten Island, New York stores on Saturday, but the workers returned to work as an act of “good faith,” according to a union spokeswoman. The union has stated that no picketing took place on Monday. Local 342 is also negotiating with other supermarket chains, including Waldbaum’s, Pathmark, and Stop & Shop.



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