

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 March 2008

Latin America

Teachers strike ends in Puerto Rico

On March 6, after ten days on strike, the Puerto Rican Teachers Federation (FMPR) directed its 42,000 members to go back to work in the face of government threats. The FMPR Executive Board said it would continue pressing the government for a collective bargaining agreement guaranteeing teachers' working conditions.

The FMPR was decertified by the administration of Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá after it threatened strike action to force the government to negotiate a new contract. FMPR leaders will be barred from participating in future negotiations.

The Association of Puerto Rican Teachers (AMPR), a satellite union of SEIU Local 1199, has sided with the government against the FMPR. The SEIU affiliate, which is based in New York, is conducting a campaign to displace the FMPR as the teachers' bargaining agent.

Last week students at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras—the country's largest university—shut the campus down for twenty-four hours in solidarity with the teachers' struggle.

School year begins with teacher strikes in Argentina

On March 3, secondary and tertiary school teachers in Argentina's northwestern province of Jujuy went on strike over wages. On Friday, the teachers voted to continue their strike for another 72 hours.

In Corrientes Province, along the Paraná River, a judge ordered striking teachers back to work, ending a week-long walkout. In Mendoza Province, along the Andes Mountains, teachers returned to work on Wednesday. Teachers will vote on whether or not to renew their job action following assemblies at each school called to discuss a government wage offer.

In Corrientes teachers are demanding that the base salary be raised from 450 pesos a month to 700 pesos.

The base salary is used to calculate retirement pay. The Education Ministry claims that the actual beginning salary for teachers increased from 1,056 to 1,229 pesos a month (around US\$400), an amount considered inadequate by most teachers.

The strikes and protests involved teachers in the provinces of Río Negro, San Luis and La Pampa.

Mexico: University employees in the second month of strike

Employees at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) in Ixtapalapa, an industrial suburb of Mexico City, have been on strike for over five weeks. The non-teaching employees are demanding a wage increase of 35 percent.

University authorities have offered a 4.5 percent raise in wages plus 1.2 percent in benefits. During the latest round of negotiation SITUAM—the union that represents the strikers—suggested it will reduce its wage demands if negotiators for UAM increase their offer. The strike began on February 1.

United States

Arkansas workers return to work after fifteen months on strike

Workers in Searcy, Arkansas ended their 15-month strike against Kohler Corporation after voting 140-6 to accept a new contract and return to work. On the same day, the company fired 140 replacement workers to make way for the return of strikers by seniority to their former jobs as they open up.

About 220 members of United Auto Workers Local 1000 struck Kohler—one of the leading manufacturers of home plumbing products—on December 9, 2006. Besides contention over wages and benefits, Kohler had been seeking wide latitude to subcontract out the jobs of workers and force workers to use vacation days for time taken under the Family Medical Leave Act, short-term disability, or workmen's compensation claims. The company was also insisting on contract language that would bar workers from holding second jobs.

The UAW claims Kohler made concessions on 9 out of 13 major issues that led to the strike but specific details were not available.

Labor Board denies union charges in New York strike

Redco Foods issued a press release February 26 claiming the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) dismissed unfair labor practices charges against the Little Falls, New York tea maker. Workers struck Redco on November 1, 2007 over the company's efforts to widen a two-tier wage and benefit system at the plant.

Management is seeking to force new hires to pay health care costs that current workers do not pay. New hires would also be excluded from the defined benefit pension plan and instead be compelled to set up individual retirement accounts, and vacations would be inferior as well.

Workers are members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers Local 50. German-based Teekanne Group, a leading producer of herbal and fruit teas, purchased Redco Foods in 1995.

Canada

Windsor auto strike ends with new contract

The strike by 175 workers at auto parts manufacturer TRW ended last week after a first contract was overwhelmingly ratified in a vote March 4.

The contract reportedly includes wage hikes of \$5.75 over the term of the three year deal, which would leave maximum pay rates still under \$17 an hour. The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) hailed the settlement as a victory, but it remains unclear whether or not the agreement includes the no-strike clause that was pushed through in the recent CAW pact with auto parts giant Magna Corporation.

The workers had been off the job for less than a week with predictions of a protracted strike when the union brought the offer to the membership for ratification. Enormous pressure was applied by the CAW and management on workers to end the walkout, which had idled 5,000 workers at a nearby Chrysler assembly plant.



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