

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 March 2008

Latin America

Peru: Public school teachers threaten to strike over accreditation exam

School teachers in the Department of Tacna, in southern Peru, are threatening to strike over a qualifying exam mandated by the administration of President Alan García. The teachers, who are being blamed by the government for the poor state of education in Peru, have denounced the test and are demanding a substantial budget increase for education.

On March 14, more than 183,000 teachers took the test, to fill 24,000 openings. Only 151 passed the test with the minimum score of 14. Another 8,500 scored over 11 points, making them eligible to teach with emergency credentials and to retake the exam on June 1.

The Peruvian Teachers' Union has questioned the suitability of the test, which consisted of two parts, one for complex math and another for literature. Union leaders reject the idea that teachers can be hired on the basis of only one test.

Education Minister José Antonio Change said that the government will not grade the test on a "curve."

Argentina: Patagonian governor threatens to sack striking public school teachers

On Friday, March 20, Governor Jorge Sobish declared an "education emergency" for the Neuquén Province in southern Argentina where teachers are in the seventh week of a strike. The measure would give the governor the right to appoint "stabilizing" school directors and replacement teachers.

Sobish justified his decree by saying that he was acting on behalf of the children and that he supported the right of replacement teachers and parents to reopen schools by force. On Wednesday, Sobish supporters, the so-called "self-appointed parents" (*padres autoconvocados*), had violently reopened some schools.

Leaders of the Association of Neuquén Education Workers (ATEN) denounced Sobish's decree as an example of his "grandstanding" tactics and questioned the governor's constitutional authority to declare an emergency of this type. The strike leaders also announced that teachers would be holding assemblies to decide the future course of the strike and to discuss if it's possible to find mediators without "blood-stained hands," a reference to the murder of teacher Carlos Fuentealba, killed by a Neuquén police officer in April 2007 during a teachers' demonstration.

Governor Sobish deplored the killing but defended his heavy-

handed repression of the protest. Among the strikers' demands is that Fuentealba's killer, Sergeant Daniel Poblete, be tried and sentenced.

Autoconvocado leader Daniel Sepulveda declared that the group would continue their provocative activities. "That is our way of asking the governor to enforce the law so that our children can study," he said.

United States

Nurses strike 10 hospitals in Bay Area

Some 5,000 nurses at 10 San Francisco Bay Area hospitals walked out on strike March 21 over a wide variety of patient and working condition issues. Members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) are seeking better benefits, safe staffing levels, rest and meal breaks, and the implementation of special lift teams to prevent patient falls and injuries to nurses from management at the chain of Sutter Health facilities.

The old contract covering nurses expired in June 2007. In both October and December, nurses at 13 Sutter Health hospitals carried out two-day strikes. Nurses have planned the current walkout to last for 10 days.

Hospital management has brought in strikebreakers to maintain services. Kevin McCormick, spokesman for the California Pacific Medical Center, told KCBS-TV, "For us it's just business as usual. It'll cost us money but we're going to carry on doing what we always do."

California hospital locks out nurses in wake of one-day strike

Management at hospitals in Yuba City, California, run by the Fremont-Rideout Health Group, responded to a one-day strike March 21 by locking out nurses for 10 days. Some 500 nurses represented by the California Nurses Association (CNA) have been without a contract for nearly a year.

The hospital administration made what it called its last, best and final offer back in January and refuses to come back to the bargaining table. It claims to have offered nurses a 5.5 percent wage increase, increased retirement benefits and easier access to health care.

Nurses rejected that offer and submitted a counterproposal focusing on staffing ratios, safe patient handling, and a 7 percent wage increase. Nurses also brought up another demand called "safe floating," which aims to prevent the hospital from forcing nurses to fill temporary staffing shortages in areas outside their normal field of training.

About 450 nurses at Fremont-Rideout voted to unionize last

year. In August, more than 200 nurses participated in a one-day strike.

New York City protest hits education budget cuts

On Wednesday, March 19, thousands of parents, teachers, students and education advocates demonstrated in the rain at New York's City Hall against cuts to the public schools this year and next that may amount to half a billion dollars. Led by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) under the slogan "Keep the Promises," demonstrators heard leaders of parent and community organizations, several unions, and local political officeholders call for the restoration of budget increases to state and city funding. The increases had been mandated by state courts after years of court cases over underfunding of the schools.

No perspective, however, was presented from the speakers' platform for any political alternative other than protest and lobbying to the big business politicians who subordinate the needs of teachers and students to the constraints of the profit system. Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed a statement headlined, "In face of New York City school cuts: a new strategy needed to defend public education."

German, with a group of high school students from Brooklyn Technical High School, commented, "I need summer school and don't want it cut. I want to succeed in life and don't want to be left behind. President Bush puts up the No Child Left Behind law, and these cuts are hypocritical."

Another Tech student, Alana, added, "In school, we hold bake sales for clubs. We have to depend on after-school programs for things like an Art and Literacy magazine that we may not be able to put out next year. What if the Air Force had to hold a bake sale?"

Wage violations at Southern California car washes

In an investigative report, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that Southern California car washes "brazenly violate basic labor and immigration laws, with little risk of penalty." The report charges that half or more of the owners ignore minimum wage laws, citing cases of pay as low as \$1.63 an hour under conditions where the state minimum wage stands at \$8 an hour. In other cases, reports indicate that workers earned only tips.

The 2000 US Census indicated that 92 percent of workers at car washes are non-citizens. Despite the fear of victimization for speaking out against owners, one fifth of workers at Southern California car washes have formally accused operators of underpaying them over the past five-year period. The *Times* piece cited one instance where an owner threatened the lives of a worker and his family in response to the filing of claims.

However, more than half of the claims filed end without any award for the worker. From 2003 to 2007, workers who received settlements got only one third of the wages they had been denied. And when workers win a settlement, owners refuse to pay the award in half of the cases. In one case where workers banded together to make accusations of underpayment,

the state fined the car wash \$17,000 for violating payroll requirements, but all of the money went into state coffers.

Telecommunications company cracks down on bathroom breaks

A supervisor at Qwest Communications in Colorado issued portable urine bags to 25 male field technicians along with the admonishment that they not waste time leaving a job site to look for a public bathroom. According to management, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which represents the workers, filed a complaint with Qwest's corporate labor relations department, but did not file a grievance.

Qwest has made time loss over bathroom breaks an issue with the union. The company responded to press inquiries by saying use of the bags is not mandatory.

Canada

B.C. Casino workers reject deal

Workers at four casinos in the British Columbia interior voted overwhelmingly to reject an offer that had been recommended by the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU), which represents them.

The 500 workers, who are employed as dealers, attendants, cashiers and food service workers at the casinos, have been without a contract since September of last year. The proposed deal was the result of talks mediated by the Labour Relations board and was enthusiastically promoted by their union leadership after several months of negotiations. A union negotiator explained that while the proposed three-year deal included wage hikes of between 2 and 3 percent, the rejection by a three-to-one margin was in part due to a new measure governing how tips are distributed. The union has been forced back to the bargaining table, and talks are expected to resume this week.

Ontario municipal strike ends

The seven-week strike by 432 inside and outside workers in the City of Kawartha Lakes, east of Toronto, Ontario, came to an end last week with the acceptance of the latest contract in a ratification vote.

The terms of the four-year deal have not been released but are reported to include the 10 percent wage increase over three years that had been mandated prior to the strike. The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).



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