

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 May 2008

## Latin America

### Brazilian customs agents strike

On May 6, the strike by Brazilian customs agents will be 50 days old. Last Wednesday, the strikers voted to reject a government offer and continue their strike. The strike has hurt Brazil's exports and imports. The agents have defied a judge's order that they return to work on April 18.

The strikers are demanding a shorter contract and that the top pay scale be raised to 19,700 reales, up from the current 13,000 reales. The government has proposed three raises—on July 2008, July 2009 and July 2010—while the strikers are insisting on two raises—on July 2008 and December 2009.

At the meeting of the National Union of Federal Custom Agents (UNAFISCO), members were divided over setting a minimum standard for negotiations.

However, both sides agreed to continue the strike and to set weekly union meetings to consider strategy.

### Mexican unions denounce President Calderon and call for national strike

Last week, a coalition of trade unions and peasant organizations declared Mexican President Felipe Calderon an "enemy of the working class." The coalition pledged that they would continue mobilizing their supporters to defend the nationalized oil company PEMEX from a government privatization scheme and that they would address the nation's food crisis. To this end, they are calling for a national strike on May 21.

Ezequiel Rosales, leader of the Oaxaca branch of the National Education Workers Syndicate, (SNTE), said that the coalition would fight for a "national political strike against the privatization of oil, gas and electricity, and against the privatization of public education and the evil and criminal reform of the public employees' retirement system." Rosales questioned the government's capacity to face up to the jobs crisis facing the Mexican working class.

### Strikers shut down Chilean mine

Strikers blocked and shut down Chile's second largest copper mine, El Teniente, on Sunday. The strikers, temporary workers, blocked buses bringing the morning shift into the mine.

The mine had briefly resumed operations the day before, after being shut down for most of the previous week.

The strike against CODELCO, the national copper company, also has shut down two smaller mines, Andina and Salvador.

The strike began on April 16. The strikers work for private subcontractors of CODELCO. At issue is CODELCO's noncompliance with agreements made last year after a month-long strike by these same employees.

## United States

### California paramedic strike ends

Some 300 paramedics employed by American Medical Response (AMR) in communities near Los Angeles, California, ended their strike over wages and benefits after three days. Members of the International Association of Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics (IAEP) went back to work under the company's wage proposal for a 20 percent wage increase over the course of a four-year contract. Strikers, many of whom make less than \$10 an hour, had been seeking a 23 percent increase under a three-year pact.

It was in the area of medical benefits, however, that the two sides clashed. Workers were opposing the imposition of a new clause that would allow AMR to change insurance providers and increase workers' portion of costs without bargaining with the union. Under the terms of the final agreement, AMR will only be constrained to maintain benefits under terms of the old contract through December 2008, after which it can pursue its goal of imposing more of the costs of medical coverage onto the backs of workers.

IAEP members first walked off the job on April 28,

affecting ambulance coverage in the areas of Santa Clarita, Antelope and San Gabriel valleys. They carried signs that read, “We can’t afford to get sick,” “Fair wages now” and “Save your life for \$9.50 an hour.”

### **Workers strike auto parts maker in Michigan**

About 100 workers went out on strike at Douglas Autotech Corp. in Bronson, Michigan, after management officials declined to continue negotiations with United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 822. Douglas Autotech, owned by the Japanese company Fuji Kiko, has demanded that wages for any employee returning from layoff be cut by \$4 an hour. In addition, the company wants to cut off healthcare to the company’s 128 retirees.

Current workers make \$15 an hour and have suffered through two concessionary contracts in the past. In the last contract, they accepted a buyout of their retirement healthcare. But, under terms now being demanded by the company, retirees, including one who is 90 years old, would be cut off healthcare benefits without a buyout.

### **Canada**

#### **Health workers strike in rural Ontario**

Twenty-six clerical workers at the Grey Bruce Health Unit near Georgian Bay went on strike last week in a fight for improvements in wages and benefits. They are members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which characterized these workers as some of the lowest paid in the province.

The union called the strike after extending the deadline to May 1. No new talks are currently planned. From the outset, the strike was marred by picket line violence, with several of the strikers, all of whom are female, reporting injuries caused by vehicles crossing the picket lines.



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