

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 May 2008

May Day protests across Latin America

Workers marched and protested in virtually every country on May 1, International Workers' Day. Some of these marches, in Cuba, Paraguay, Venezuela, were government sanctioned or organized. In others, Mexico, Ecuador, Nicaragua, they took on the form of protests over wages, the high price of food, jobs and human rights.

In Uruguay, workers demonstrated in Montevideo to demand the abrogation of a law that prevents the courts from trying military officers for their role in human rights violations during the 1973-85 dictatorship. A rally organized by the mainstream Uruguayan trade unions took place in the Chicago Martyrs Square in this South American capital. A second protest, led by dissident trade unionists, also took place in Montevideo.

In Brazil one of the demands raised in marches across the country was the full implementation of the 40-hour week. Current labor legislation provides for a 44-hour workweek for urban workers. The legislation still does not apply to many agricultural and low-wage workers, who often are forced to work 12 hours a day.

In Mexico, over 70,000 workers, supporters of independent and dissident trade unions, marched together with peasant organizations demanding an end to government plans to privatize oil and electricity and in favor of "food sovereignty." The protesters rallied at the Three Cultures Square in Mexico City's Central Zocalo square and denounced the policies of President Felipe Calderon that are intended to weaken the labor movement.

In Nicaragua, hundreds of workers and supporters of independent unions marched in protest against the mass sacking of government workers and of workers employed in export sweatshop industries located in free trade zones, the so-called *maquiladoras*. Workers also carried signs protesting the high cost of food.

That evening an official march took place, attended

by Sandinista President Daniel Ortega. Ortega made no mention of the workers' demands on food, jobs and wages, except to confirm that 15,000 more jobs will be destroyed this year, as *maquiladoras* transfer production to lower wage regions such as Cambodia and Vietnam. So far this year the government has sacked 10,000 of its own employees.

Airline pilots strike in Buenos Aires

On May 10 and 11, pilots employed by Austral Airlines went on strike in Argentina, forcing management to suspend 70 flights.

The pilots reject a proposed merger of Austral and Argentina Airlines. Juan Carlos López Mena, a potential Argentina Airlines stockholder, is promoting the merger. López Mena also owns an airline that flies between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, across the La Plata River.

The walkout defied an order by the Labor Department blocking the strike and instructing that the issue be settled through binding arbitration.

The pilots union issued a press release denouncing the merger and said that the strike was caused by the "grave abuse of the agreements between shareholders and the national government, which risk the functioning of the company and jobs at Austral Airlines."

The press release provided evidence that Austral's airplanes are not being properly maintained and that the training for pilots has been cancelled.

Argentina Airlines, managed by Grupo Marsans, a Spanish transnational, was privatized in the 1990s. It controls 85 percent of the country's domestic air travel. The airline is heavily in debt and both the merger and Mr. López Mena's participation would inject much needed capital into the ailing carrier.

Transportation strike in Nicaragua

A weeklong strike by truck, bus and taxi cooperatives in Nicaragua is leaving Managua without essential supplies. The job action is paralyzing fishing in the

Pacific Ocean port of Puerto Corinto, as well milk production and raw material deliveries.

The main issue is fuel costs. Though the government has negotiated a 30-cent discount and a rebate in value added taxes the strike continued through last weekend.

Oil workers strike in Trinidad

About 6,000 oil workers walked off their jobs at the government-owned oil company Petrotin. The workers say that Petrotin is ignoring health and safety issues. Another issue is a possible wave of layoffs because of the company's plan to lease or sell some exploration acreage.

Ancil Roget, leader of the Trade Unionist union, declared that the company has been making promises for years to resolve those issues but has yet to take action. He warned that the job actions would continue until all the workers' grievances are resolved.

New contract talks follow partial strikes by Los Angeles janitors

Contract talks between building owners and the union representing 6,000 Los Angeles janitors continued over the weekend following a series of walkouts earlier in the week.

The new talks were brought about by the intervention of Los Angeles Democratic Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa after members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) rejected the building owners' proposal and struck about 40 downtown buildings May 7. The two sides agreed to resume negotiations and the SEIU cancelled any plans for future walkouts during the negotiations.

According to the union, janitors want to close the pay gap between downtown janitors and those working in outlying areas. Currently, downtown janitors make between \$10.70 and \$12.00 an hour, which is about \$1.30 an hour more than their counterparts in suburban areas.

California professor fired for refusing to sign loyalty oath

A newly hired professor at California State University, Fullerton was fired from her job after refusing to sign a loyalty oath. Wendy Gonaver discovered, after being hired as a lecturer in American Studies at the school, that faculty members are required to sign an oath to defend the Constitutions of the United States and California "against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

Gonaver, a Quaker, declined to sign the oath and instead submitted a six-sentence personal statement claiming that the oath violated the First Amendment and discriminates against religious pacifists. She also pointed out that to sign the statement "while harboring legitimate religious and political objections" could subject her to charges of perjury.

A Cal State Fullerton spokesperson said of Gonaver's personal statement: "The position of the university is that her entire added material was against the law." The California loyalty oath was added to the state constitution in 1952 as a part of the anticommunist witch-hunts and applied to those holding jobs in the public sector.

Calgary, Alberta school support staff poised for job action

The 3,500 members of the Calgary Board of Education Staff Association could go on strike or take other job action this week depending on the outcome of a union meeting to be held May 15.

The staff, who are employed as cafeteria supervisors, office staff and technical support, have been without a contract since last August and are fighting for improvements in wages, benefits and job security. The union is required to give 72 hours notice before calling a strike and the school board is appealing to the provincial government to pursue mediation in the dispute.



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