

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 June 2008

## Latin America

### São Paulo teachers to strike this week

An assembly of public school teachers employed by the state of São Paulo voted on June 13 to strike beginning June 16. The educators are demanding that São Paulo Governor José Serra abolish a decree, imposed on May 28, that affects the manner in which temporary and substitute workers are hired, fired and promoted. The strike will last a week, according to a union source.

Following the strike vote, thousands of teachers marched through the center of the city of São Paulo and rallied in Praça de la República square. The state employs 220,000 teachers.

State education officials issued a press release that claims that the new measures are merely designed to create a more efficient system and to guarantee continuity in education, which read in part, “A vote by a group of teachers to strike is not justified, except for political motives.”

### Sugar-cane cutters strike in Brazil

Sugar-cane cutters in São Paulo state walked off their jobs on June 11. The strike is affecting the cities of Mineiros do Tietê, Dois Córregos e Rosália, and Campos Novos Paulista. The workers are demanding their back pay. The Pau d’Alho sugar mill, which processes the cane into sugar, declared that it is facing financial difficulties and that it plans to pay the workers this Friday.

The workers also demand to be paid for the day when they take time off to seek medical attention. A meeting is scheduled this Thursday between union negotiators and management representatives.

### Peru: Protests escalate in Moquegua

A civic strike in the Moquegua region in southern Peru to demand a more equal distribution of mining profits escalated on the fifth day of protests last Friday. The strike, which includes barricading roads, is creating food and fuel shortages in the Tacna region that borders

northern Chile.

Tacna Governor Hugo Ordoñez declared on Friday that the strike has created a “social and economic state of emergency.” Ordoñez is demanding that the administration of President Alan García “face up to his responsibility” and put an end to the protests.

### Peruvian government declares copper strike illegal

A strike by copper miners against the Cerro Verde mine company has been declared illegal by the right-wing government of President Alan García. The government’s decision will make it possible for the company, the third largest copper producer in Peru, to sack the strikers.

The striking workers are demanding that the company follow its collective bargaining agreement. The walkout began last Tuesday. Cerro Verde is controlled by McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc.

### Bolivian unions to strike this week

The Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) declared last Friday that there would be a national strike of indefinite duration starting this week. It also declared its intention to barricade roads to protest President Evo Morales’s refusal to negotiate improvements in labor conditions.

COB Secretary Mario López demanded that the government approve a new pension law as well as improvements in wages and working conditions. “We have no alternative but to go on strike,” said López.

In addition to the national strike, since last week the Morales government has faced popular protests, including road barricades, in the tin-mining region of Potosí and Santa Rosa del Sara, demanding the construction of new roads into the region. Along the southern border with Argentina, the government confronts protests over the lack of housing.

### Colombian truckers demand fuel subsidies

The 150,000-strong Colombian Truckers Associations will launch a strike this week to protest the high price of fuel. The decision to strike resulted

from the failure of a meeting with the minister of transportation, Andrés Uriel.

The owner-operators accused the Uribe administration of renegeing on a pact negotiated four years ago to subsidize fuel costs.

## **United States**

### **Nine-week strike ends at Virginia defense plant**

Workers at the General Dynamics Armament and Technical Products in Marion, Virginia, voted by a 70 percent margin June 13 to end their nine-week strike. The United Auto Workers/United Defense Workers Local 2850 leadership claimed the strike was not about money but “respect” and claimed that a major concession by the company was to change the contract length from 42 months to 48 months, thereby avoiding an expiration date toward the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

According to the *Smyth County News*, not all workers agreed the contract represented a victory. “During the meeting Friday union members opposing the new contract said privately it was too similar to the previous failed agreement, but many seemed resigned to what they said was a likelihood that the contract would pass.”

A May 30 letter from the company to striking workers threatened strikebreaking if workers did not accept terms demanded by General Dynamics. “You’ve already witnessed the arrival of temporary replacement workers. We will bring in more as needed to meet production schedules. This weekend, we will begin placing ads in local papers to recruit workers from the local area. You also have the right to participate by returning to work. That’s a choice you have to make as an individual.”

It concluded with a rejoinder that aimed at both demoralizing workers and pushing the union leadership to bring greater pressure to bear on workers to ratify: “The agreement was accepted and unanimously endorsed by the Union bargaining committee. However, to date this has not resulted in a ratified agreement.”

### **Company ceases car-hauling operations in wake of strike**

Performance Transportation Services, Inc. (PTS) announced June 13 it would close its doors five days after 1,250 members of the Teamsters union called a strike. Allen Park, Michigan-based PTS, the second-

largest car hauling company in North America, had been operating under Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

On June 4, the bankruptcy court authorized a 15 percent wage cut be applied over a two-month period against employees represented by the Teamsters. Subsequently, the union and company failed to reach a longer-term concessions agreement to bail out the company. The Teamsters charged that PTS failed to provide sufficient information to back their demands.

PTS operated 24 facilities and a fleet of 1,800 trucks that provided transfer services for North American auto manufacturers. The Teamsters are currently negotiating a national contract covering other companies in the car-hauling business. PTS had previously withdrawn from the contract talks, a move opposed by the Teamsters.

## **Canada**

### **B.C. tractor workers on strike**

After 96 percent of those casting ballots voted to go on strike, 163 workers at 13 Brandt Tractor locations across British Columbia walked off the job last week in a fight for wage and pension parity with their counterparts within the company.

Brandt Tractor is one of the largest John Deere dealers of forest and construction equipment in western Canada, and the union says the company is demanding significant concessions in a new contract, including the entrenchment of a two-tiered wage system. The striking workers are represented by Operating Engineers Local 115. Despite appeals from the union to continue negotiations, the company has said that no new talks will take place until the end of the month.



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