

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 June 2008

Latin America

São Paulo teachers strike

On June 20, striking São Paulo teachers voted to continue their strike until June 27. Thousands of teachers also marched and rallied in São Paulo to press their contract and wage demands. The 250,000 public school teachers employed by the state have been on strike since June 16.

Though the vote against returning to work appears to have been overwhelming, São Paulo's Department of Education issued a press release on Friday accusing a "few teachers" of opposing changes in the education law passed by decree by the Sao Paulo governor last May 28 that, in the opinion of the department, "improve teaching, relations between teachers and students and the continuity of the teaching process." The Department claims that only 2 percent of the state's teachers are adhering to the strike. The decree gives the state a free hand in determining how teachers will be hired and where they will be placed. The decree also imposes new performance standards on teachers.

These claims are rejected by the São Paulo State Public School Teachers Association (APEOESP). APEOESP President Carlos Ramiro de Castro declared that more than 70 percent of the teachers have adhered to the strike. Ramiro de Castro also denounced the education decree for being authoritarian and for scapegoating teachers instead of providing the necessary investments to improve education across the state.

The striking teachers are demanding cancellation of the May 28 decree. Ramiro Castro also rejected as insufficient a government offer of a 5 percent wage increase and a 7 percent increase in benefits.

Brazilian transit strike

Transit workers in the Brazilian city of Recife in the state of Pernambuco carried out a 24-hour protest strike on June 20. The employees of the private transit companies that operate Recife's 354 bus lines are

demanding a 12.8 percent wage increase. The employers' group has offered 4 percent. The protest took bus customers by surprise because there had been no previous warning.

The union representing the striking transit employees indicated that the one-day strike will be followed by a longer walkout if there is no progress in negotiations this week.

United States

Food service workers strike at Boston convention centers

Some 400 members of the union UNITE HERE struck the giant food service corporation Aramark at Boston's Hynes Convention Center and the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center over the weekend, charging unfair labor practices. Union members are seeking higher wages and the extension of healthcare benefits to temporary workers.

The union is arguing that while Aramark's services at the two convention centers were infrequent in the past, that has changed with the use of temporary employees who are working longer and longer hours but not receiving benefits. Aramark has rejected the union's demand as too costly. The previous contract expired in October 2007. Since that time, Aramark has fired two workers in what UNITE HERE contends have been attempts to intimidate the workforce as a whole.

Picketers have not been seeking to turn those attending the convention away from events, but instead have been asking them not to patronize Aramark's food concessions inside the arena. The *Boston Globe* quoted Kati Mack, a native Albanian attending a convention event, who said she would honor the boycott: "We see there are a variety of people from a variety of backgrounds. It's working class. These are the people who suffer the most and they don't have a voice so they have to strike to be heard."

Boilermakers reject second proposal as Wisconsin strike continues

Workers at Kewaunee Fabrications, just east of Green Bay, Wisconsin, voted by a 186-52 margin June 18 to reject a second contract proposal in a strike that began May 12. According to the company, the new four-year contract proposal offered annual increases of 3.4 percent.

Boilermakers Local 487 President Russ Castro told *Kewaunee County News*, “The big argument was over insurance again. They didn’t budge.” The union leadership recommended the new proposal despite the fact that it did not represent a real improvement over the previous offer. That proposal called for 3.5 percent annual raises over the course of a three-year pact. But when insurance increases are factored in, the hourly raise in real terms was a meager 15 cents.

Kewaunee Fabrications has been maintaining production since May 19 with temporary replacement workers. In the wake of the contract rejection, it said it would step up its efforts to meet contractual obligations.

Canada

Montreal ambulance dispatchers take job action

Ambulance dispatchers in Montreal and nearby Laval staged a one-day rotating strike last Wednesday to protest the slow pace of negotiations for a new contract.

The Urgences-Santé workers have been without a contract for four years and are seeking wage parity with 911 dispatchers employed by the city of Montreal who reportedly earn up to 32 percent more.

London city staff work-to-rule

Inside workers for the city of London in southern Ontario have undertaken limited job action, cutting back on extra duties in advance of a possible all-out strike within a month.

The workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are employed in a range of services from building inspection to welfare administration. They are fighting for improvements in wages and benefits in excess of the 2.2 percent yearly increase last offered by the city.



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