

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 July 2008

Latin America

Guatemalans protest food prices

Tens of thousands of Guatemalans took to the streets on June 27 to protest the high cost of living. The demonstrations, held in several cities, were organized by the National Front for Struggle (FNL), a coalition of public employee trade unions, citizens groups and the main opposition party, the URNG. This was the first mass protest against the government of President Álvaro Colom since he came to power last January.

In Guatemala City, the protesters rallied at the National Legislature and delivered petitions demanding legislation that stops price increases that “only favor the rich and increase poverty.” Similar marches and rallies took place across the country.

The increase in commodity prices has devastated living standards in Guatemala, a country in which 73 percent of the population is classified as either poor or extremely poor. Government measures to reduce the impact of price increases by lowering taxes have provided little or no relief.

Chilean teachers announce more protests against new education law

Public school teachers in Chile announced on June 28 they plan to mobilize against the new General Education Law being discussed in the legislature, which opponents say opens the door to state subsidies of for profit schools at the expense of public education. The law was passed by the Chamber of Deputies on June 19th and will be discussed in the Senate this Tuesday.

On June 18, more than 10,000 teachers and students marched through the streets of Santiago. The president of the 90,000-strong Teachers' Union, Jaime Gajardo, indicated that, beginning this Tuesday, the teachers will march and rally across the country and would set the date for a “social and political strike” to protest the law. Teachers are demanding measures to strengthen education for all students, no matter their economic

circumstances.

On June 26, more than 60 students were arrested in Santiago and in the northern city of Copiapó. The arrests in Santiago took place when police blocked the demonstrators from marching on Chile's Government House, the Moneda Palace, to petition Chilean President Michelle Bachelet. The police used water cannon and tear gas against the protesting students.

The government has refused to postpone national university entrance exams in deference to protesting students, many of whom have missed days in school. In response, student leaders have declared they are willing to lose the school year rather than accept the new law.

United States

Worker hit by car on Las Vegas casino picket line

A union worker picketing at the Gold Coast hotel-casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, was struck by vehicle June 27 in an event that fellow protesters described as deliberate. A Ford Bronco entered the casino's parking lot and halted a short distance inside the property. When Lenny Butterfield, a 41-year-old member of Sheet Metal Workers Local 88, resumed his pacing by crossing the parking lot's entrance, the Bronco then shifted into reverse and lurched back across the picket line. Butterfield was hit and thrown into the street.

Fellow picketers provided police with a detailed description, including the license plate number, but no arrest has been made. Butterfield was taken to University Medical center and treated for cuts and bruises.

Washington State worker injured in 40-foot fall

A construction worker in King County, Washington, fell off a scaffold June 27 and plunged 40 feet into a wet well of a wastewater pump station. The unidentified man, who worked for Cascade Painting, was rushed to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle to be treated for severe head and chest injuries.

The Washington Department of Labor has initiated an investigation into the accident. The Juanita Bay Pump

station construction project began in 2005 and was scheduled to finish this year.

Supreme Court overturns California law barring companies from using taxpayer funds in anti-union campaigns

The United States Supreme Court voted by a 7-2 margin June 19 to strike down a California law that barred companies from using state-derived funds in propaganda campaigns to discourage workers from joining a union. The bill, passed by the California Assembly in 2000, was aimed at companies such as nursing homes that receive state finances for their operations from using those in anti-union campaigns.

Ten other states have since followed California in enacting such legislation. In 2002, the US Chamber of Commerce filed a lawsuit and won its case in federal court. But in 2006, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned that decision, arguing that the use of taxpayers' money violated the "neutrality" of labor law.

The court majority declared that the California law infringed upon companies' freedom of speech.

Canada

Vancouver inside workers set to strike

The union representing more than 400 inside workers for Metro Vancouver issued a strike notice last week, but no strike has yet been called and a tentative agreement has been reached between the city and outside workers. Workers affected include translators, engineering and administrative staff, as well as some sewage workers.

Details of negotiations have not been made public. The city is reportedly offering wage increases of 17.5 percent over three years. While the union has said it is seeking a number of other improvements in a new contract, they have indicated that they are in no hurry to call a strike. An as-yet-undetermined number of union members are expected to be deemed in essential services in the event of a strike, and the union has indicated it will wait for a ruling on who is included in that category before it calls workers off the job. Such rulings typically take several days, if not weeks.



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