

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 August 2008

Latin America

Córdoba, Argentina: Thousands of government workers and teachers confront police over pensions

On August 20, thousands of teachers and government workers marched through downtown Córdoba, Argentina's second-largest city. At issue is the announced intention of the provincial administration to slash monthly pensions greater than 5,000 pesos (US\$1,700). The workers belong to 24 different unions.

The striking workers rallied at two separate locations. One group marched on the provincial legislature, and the security forces confronted the demonstrators with rubber bullets. The second contingent marched along Vélez Sársfield Avenue in downtown Córdoba. At the rally point in Patio Olmos, the strike leaders demanded the resignation of Osvaldo Giordano, who heads the pension board, and a meeting with Juan Schiaretti, the provincial governor.

The workers reject the government's claim that the cost-cutting measure is necessary to resolve a deficit in the pension fund. Government minister Carlos Caserio blamed the strikers for the confrontations with the police, accusing them of trying to create chaos in order to pressure the public.

Teachers strike in Morelos, México

On August 23, leaders of 23,000 public school teachers in the State of Morelos, México, declared a strike of indefinite duration to repudiate budget cuts in education, prolonging a five-day walkout begun last week. On Friday, the strikers marched and rallied to express their opposition to the so-called "Alliance for Quality Education." The Alliance was set up on May 15 by the Department of Education and the bureaucracy of the teachers' union in México City.

Friday's protest brought together striking teachers and thousands of parents who support them, marching through the streets of Cuernavaca, the state capital. Protests also took place in the states of Veracruz and Quintana Roo.

Strikers insist that the Alliance is a trap set by the Federal Government led by President Calderón in collaboration with the president of the Education Workers' Union, Elba Esther Gordillo, to gut public education and privatize the education system.

As part of the so-called quality initiative, the government announced that it was shutting down 300 teachers' colleges it claimed were not producing quality teachers. At the heart of the Alliance for Quality Education is a project to subordinate education to the needs of big business, according to the México City daily *La Jornada*.

Teamsters end strike at Kentucky Ford plant

The 435 members of Teamsters Local 89 have ended a five-day strike that had blocked shipment of Ford vehicles from the Louisville Assembly Plant and the Kentucky Truck Plant. The parties reached a settlement after Ford terminated its contract with Auto Port, the Michigan-based subcontractor that operates its rail yards.

When Auto Port took over the contract last June, it set out to get rid of the Teamsters, whose members have loaded new vehicles onto railcars at both plants for decades. Auto Port tried to set up a new unit of the Machinists union and pay those workers \$10 to \$12 per hour instead of the \$20 to \$22 paid Teamsters.

The Teamsters had already agreed to a reduction to between \$17 and \$18 per hour, but insisted the company sign on to the Teamster Master Automobile Transporters Agreement, which guarantees Teamster jobs and seniority when Ford switches transportation subcontractors. Auto Port refused, and a strike began on August 18.

Ford fired Auto Port on August 19, but, according to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the head of the local Teamster unit alleged the company was training UAW members at the Kentucky Truck Plant to perform the jobs of its members, prolonging the job action several more days.

Machinists threaten strike at Boeing

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) indicated that it would oppose recent contract proposals put forward by Boeing Corp. and could launch a strike September 4. The company's final offer is expected September 1, Labor Day, and IAM members are set to vote September 3, the day the old contract expires.

The IAM has singled out three proposals by the Washington State-based aerospace manufacturer as unacceptable: the elimination of defined benefit pensions for new hires; the scrapping of early retiree medical coverage for new workers; and outsourcing.

The union has also said the company's wage offer is unacceptable. The company has proposed a 2.5 percent increase in the first year and 2 percent wage increases in the last two years of the agreement. A \$2,500 lump-sum bonus is also included.

Boeing withdrew an earlier proposal to split off some 750 workers at its Wichita, Kansas, operations onto a different contract.

Boeing made a record \$4.1 billion net profit in 2007 and has a record \$346 billion of civil and defense work on its books. A total of 27,000 workers are represented in the current negotiations at Boeing operations in Washington State, Oregon and Kansas.

Canada

Quebec Wal-Mart workers get union contract

In a North American first, workers at the Wal-Mart outlet in Gatineau, Quebec, across the river from Canada's capital city, Ottawa, have signed a contract agreement with the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

While two other Wal-Marts in Quebec had previously been unionized, workers were not able to obtain a contract from the notoriously anti-union company. One store closed as a result of the certification, and both cases are still before the courts. The new contract was imposed by a Quebec provincial arbitrator after a three-year effort by the union.

The three-year agreement will lift wages C\$2.00 an hour above the C\$8.50 an hour workers were getting, and will provide improvements in areas such as vacation provisions. Wal-Mart has indicated it will fight union certification for two other bargaining units at the same outlet, but the union has said that it expects two more Wal-Mart stores to obtain union contracts

before the end of the year.



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