

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

## **Chile: Government workers return to work**

More than 400,000 striking government workers returned to work November 21 after the Chilean Senate unanimously approved a 10 percent increase in their wages. In addition, the Senate approved a signing bonus of either US\$310 or US\$155, depending on wage levels. The raise falls short of the workers' original demand of 14.5 percent, which was meant as compensation for past inflation and for projected future economic growth. As it stands, the wage increase barely covers the rate of inflation of 9.9 percent over the last 12 months. Government workers in Chile earn as little as US\$377 per month.

Public health doctors and judges, who up until now had stayed on the job, joined the strike on November 18.

## **Uruguayan healthcare workers fight pay cut, doctors threaten strike**

Non-medical Uruguayan Medical Union Insurance Fund (CASMU) employees are involved in a bitter strike against the agency to protest a pay cut. Even though the pay cut, imposed in September and October, was rescinded, non-medical CASMU workers went on strike November 19. The strike is scheduled to end December 1. CASMU directors have until that date to return the workers' wages and to agree to rescind demands for pay cuts.

Meanwhile, on November 21, medical doctors in Uruguay demanded government approval of bailout measures for CASMU. The fund, which provides medical insurance for thousands of Uruguayan citizens, is on the brink of defaulting on more than US\$90 million debt. A meeting of doctors who are members of the Uruguayan Doctors' Union (SMU) decided last Thursday to strike on November 27 if a US\$10 million

government bridge loan is not approved.

On November 18, government authorities pledged US\$60 million to pay back wages to CAMSU workers for September and October, pleading with workers not to strike. In return, CASMU is expected to cut costs by US\$1.4 million each month.

CASMU employees have demanded a meeting with Uruguayan President Tavaré Vázquez. The workers have denounced the government for favoring for-profit medical insurers over CASMU and Montevideo's Clínicas Hospital, a public teaching hospital. So far, President Vázquez has resisted meeting with the workers, citing "scheduling reasons."

## **Mexico: CTM leaders call for shared sacrifice in face of global crisis**

Last week, Joaquin Gamboa Pascoe, national leader of the Mexican Labor Confederation (CTM), called on government, corporations and workers to "share the sacrifice" in response to the effects on Mexico of the current global financial crisis.

Speaking in Monterrey at a meeting of Mexican corporate leaders, which included Ricardo González Sada, president of the Mexican Employers Confederation (COPARMEX), Gamboa declared, "Mexican workers are accepting cuts in hours, days off without pay, and, above all, not to strike." In return, he pleaded with corporate leaders not to use strikes as an excuse for shutting down plants. He asked that corporations and the government make industry more competitive by training employees, modernizing their plants and reducing government regulations.

In an interview with the Durango daily *El Siglo*, Durango CTM leader and former state governor José Ramírez Gamero declared that he expected wages to keep up with Mexican inflation. "Unions and management have never had any quarrel. Company owners have always understood and responded well to the unions," declared Gamero. He added that "workers were the firms' most important asset and had to be taken care of."

CTM leaders also downplayed last week's announcement by Pepsi México that it would shut down 30 plants and eliminate 2,200 jobs. Union leader Armando Neyra Chávez indicated that the sackings would be negotiated between management and the

union. He also declared that, in keeping with government requests, the union would be reducing its wage demands.

The CTM is closely allied with Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and to its corporatist program. Gamboa and Neyra's line is in keeping with the CTM's history of class collaboration and betrayal.

### **Pennsylvania school district threatens to cut off striking teachers' healthcare**

The Northwest Area School District in the area of Shickshinny, Pennsylvania, announced last week it cut off healthcare benefits for the 103 striking teachers. "We have put the payroll department on notice that as of today the district is prepared to cease health-care coverage," said school superintendent Nancy Tkatch.

The strike revolves around wages and the school district's demand that teachers pay a percentage of their healthcare coverage. The Northwest Area Education Association, while opposing the extent of the transfer of healthcare costs to teachers, has conceded that teachers should pay a portion of the costs. The district is also seeking to limit wage increases to between 2.5 and 6 percent. The last contract covering Northwest Area teachers expired on August 31, 2005.

### **Union ends strike at Ohio plant**

Workers at the American Standard Brands plant in Salem, Ohio, voted to return to work after five weeks on strike. The vote by about 340 members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1538 came after the state government denied unemployment benefits to workers. American Standard manufactures bath and kitchen fixtures.

Workers were set to go back to work Monday under a contract originally proposed by the company. Terms of the contract include a 5 percent cut in pay and 25 percent cut in the company's contribution to workers' 401(k) retirement plans.

The USW international condemned the American Standard workers to strike in isolation, while Joe Holcomb, a staff representative who had been working with Local 1538, blamed workers who crossed picket lines as a reason for the defeat. "Some of our members crossed, and it hurt us from being successful in what we were trying to do," he said.

Holcomb also indicated the kind of pressure workers faced. "First you lose your wage, then you have to contribute more on your insurance, then you're losing your 401(k) money. You're already losing it in the stock market, now you're not getting any

of it back, so it all goes together."

The union is continuing to pursue workers' unemployment claims and has also filed an unfair labor practices complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming the company refused to bargain on the contract.

### **Postal workers on strike**

More than 2,100 postal workers across Canada, members of the Union of Postal Communications Employees, went on strike November 17, slowing mail delivery across the country.

With an overwhelming strike mandate, the union representing clerical, financial, engineering and administrative workers says that the biggest issue in the dispute is over a Canada Post plan to substitute contract provisions for disability and sick leave with Employment Insurance benefits, which would represent an historic setback in union rights.

Canada Post has said its "final offer" would provide short-term disability coverage that the union says would reduce the time paid from 20 to 7 days. The union is also asking for a 9 percent increase in wages over three years while the employer is offering increases totaling 10.5 percent over the life of a four-year contract. No talks are currently scheduled.

### **Ontario paramedics pushed to strike**

More than 80 paramedics in and around Cornwall in eastern Ontario are being pushed into strike or lockout by city negotiators who last week invoked measures to provoke a work stoppage that could begin November 26.

The union says it wants to avoid a strike and says workers are simply fighting for wage parity with neighboring counterparts. Budget increases for other services such as fire and policing have been 10 times that for Emergency Medical Services in Cornwall, Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry. Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) negotiators say they are losing personnel to other municipalities that pay higher wages.



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