

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Mexican trade unionists to mobilize over minimum wage

In Colima state, Mexico, the Trade Union Front is planning to mobilize the region's workers to protest the insufficient increase in the Mexican minimum wage, the high cost of living, increases in fuel costs and usurious credit card interest rates. Tentatively, the protest will take place next week. The front was formed by 30 trade unions, representing 20,000 workers.

The Front's coordinator, Leonardo Gutiérrez Chávez, emphasized the high cost of basic foodstuff, which is causing misery among Colima's workers. "We are inviting all workers to form part of this front," declared Chávez. "We must begin with a series of mobilizations."

The global recession is having a brutal effect on the Mexican economy. Chávez indicated that there is widespread agreement that there will be no GDP growth this year. "This means increasing unemployment and plant closures, something that is of great concern for the working class."

Chávez also denounced the paltry 4.9 percent increase in the Mexican minimum wage for Colima, short of the 6.27 percent needed just to keep up with inflation. Both minimum wage workers and higher paid workers are entering 2009 with less buying power than in 2008.

According to a recent article posted by the Mexican online journal Milenio.com, the Mexican monthly minimum wage varies between 1,588 and 1,644 pesos, depending on the region. This represents approximately €82. In European terms, the minimum wage is two-thirds of the Bulgarian minimum, the lowest in Europe, and one 17th of the Irish, the highest in the continent. The average Mexican wage is 97 percent what it was in 1993.

Argentina: Unemployed set up soup kitchen at economic minister's home

Workers recently sacked by Envases de Plata, a manufacturer of aluminum containers, set up a soup kitchen at the home of Economics Minister Carlos Fernandez. The workers are also occupying the Envases plant in the Buenos Aires suburb of Quilmes.

The sacked workers, who were laid off in October, are owed wages and are demanding that they be rehired. Argentina, like most of Latin America, is beginning to feel the effects of the global economic crisis.

Strike leader Roberto Paéz declared that the workers took this measure to make visible their demands and to demand their jobs back because "we need to work. We are demanding that the minister force the company to make a proposal that would resolve this issue." He also indicated that the workers were informed indirectly of their layoff, when the Labor Ministry told their union. The company has yet to contact them.

Oaxaca workers confront police

On Saturday, members of the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples (APPO) protesting at the United States consulate in the City of Oaxaca, México, were attacked by the police. The purpose of the rally had been to protest the Israeli assault on Gaza. Nineteen APPO leaders were arrested. Some of those arrested reported being beaten and having their possessions stolen by the police.

The police also attacked an outdoor meeting of APPO supporters in front of the state police headquarters. The APPO supporters were attempting to negotiate the release of the 19 APPO leaders. Thirty police surrounded the group and proceeded to spray them with tear gas.

SNTE leaders denounced the police attacks as an affront to the right of assembly and free speech and as an attempt to criminalize social protest.

The arrested leaders were only released after the APPO made it clear that they were ready to mobilize and block the highway that links Oaxaca and Puerto Ángel. 'An attack on APPO is an attack on the teachers' union,' declared the SNTE.

The APPO, an umbrella organization that includes several hundred ethnic and labor groups, and the SNTE led the wave of protests in Oaxaca in October 2006 against the corrupt

administration of Governor Ulises Ruiz.

Poultry strikers in Ohio face harassment

On December 19, striking Case Farms poultry workers in Winesburg, Ohio found that vandals had burned their strike shed and painted the adjacent road with homophobic graffiti. Union members went on strike in July 2007 after rejecting a 15-cent-an-hour raise.

Strike organizer Tim Mullins believes the most recent action against the strikers constitutes a hate crime. The local sheriff rejected the suggestion.

Strikers have faced other harassment, including the spreading of manure on fields adjacent to the strike zone, corn-harvesting equipment spraying workers with husks and cobs, and the weekly tipping of the strikers' portable toilet.

Major issues unresolved for Continental pilots

Pay and benefits issues for the nearly 5,000 pilots of Continental Airlines remain unresolved in talks that have dragged on since 2007. The union wants to recover wage concessions made in 2005, which it estimated amounted more than \$200 million per year. Air Line Pilots Association leader Jay Pierce remarked, "The givebacks that were designed to help keep Continental out of bankruptcy were a loan to secure our futures ... and now it is past due."

Washington state workers' union sues over governor's budget request

The Federation of State Employees for Washington State sued Governor Chris Gregoire last week for submitting a budget request that fails to provide for pay raises and benefits that the union and governor agreed to in a contract last summer. The union accused the governor of bad-faith bargaining and requested a county judge force the governor to submit a request for \$216 million to cover the additional raises.

Governor Gregoire invoked a provision from a 2002 law that regulates collective bargaining. It allows the governor not to request funding that is not feasible. The state's budget director issued such a finding on December 16, one day before the governor issued the new budget. In part, it stated, "Given the projected deficit of \$5.7 billion, funding the increases for

compensation and fringe benefits provisions contained in the collective bargaining agreements and arbitration awards at the expense of other vital governmental services is not feasible financially for the state."

The governor's decision affects a total of 33 unions, freezing pay and benefits worth \$453 million.

Federal government orders Ottawa bus strike vote

In an unprecedented move, Conservative Labour Minister Rona Ambrose has ordered 2,300 striking Ottawa, Ontario bus drivers, dispatchers and mechanics to vote on a contract offer that has already been rejected by both the union negotiating committee and, in a previous vote, by the union membership. The workers, organized by the Local 279 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, have been on strike since December 10.

The dispute hinges on attempts by the City of Ottawa to force bus drivers to relinquish control of schedule and route assignments that the workers maintain through their seniority system. In 1999, the union gained control of these matters in exchange for a 2 percent wage cut. But now the city, led by Conservative Mayor Larry O'Brien, has demanded that the workers surrender this contract right in order to further drive up productivity.

Normally, federal cabinet ministers do not involve themselves in local transit issues. But, because the Ottawa bus routes cross an inter-provincial boundary into Hull, Quebec, Ambrose was able to directly intervene. A vote must be held by January 9. Fully 98 percent of the local membership voted against a similar contract proposal before the strike began.

Citing concerns for "public safety," Ambrose also asked an industrial relations tribunal to consider designating some or all of the city's transit system an "essential service," thereby opening the way to break the strike even if her attempt to force a vote fails to achieve the desired result.



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