

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Argentina: Hunger strike against poverty

About 400 inhabitants of the city of La Quiaca in Argentina's Jujuy province have declared a hunger strike against the massive poverty that exists in the region.

"They are hungry. People are striking against their own hunger," declared human rights activist Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. Esquivel indicated that the strike would be of indefinite duration. The strikers are demanding that the provincial and federal governments provide solutions and resources for the inhabitants of the area.

The organizers of the protests published a document that indicates that extreme poverty is endemic to this region. There is no work outside of tourism and labor in the pastures. The document also gives evidence of high rates of child malnutrition and of police repression. According to Esquivel, "Whoever demands civic rights is arrested."

The official poverty rate in the Jujuy province region is 30 percent compared to 17.8 percent for Argentina as a whole.

Chile: Retirement fund workers on strike

The union that represents 506 administrative workers in the Provida retirement mutual fund decided to launch a strike on January 2 because of deadlocked contract negotiations. Striking workers are accusing Provida management of having no

interest in signing a contract and of breaking previous agreements.

The strike is over wages, bonuses and working conditions. Workers accuse the company of constantly reducing its wage offer, allegedly because of the world financial crisis.

"We are on strike because the situation has drastically deteriorated," declared union leader Guillermo Reyes. "We have tried to negotiate, but they act as if nothing was going on. And they have now replaced us with student interns and they have brought in private contractors to attend to the public. We will continue the mobilizations until these issues are resolved."

Chile's privately run retirement system recently suffered huge losses from the collapse of the international credit system. Mutual funds such as Provida that have suffered financial losses have responded by slashing future retirement benefits, cutting services and reducing wages and benefits.

Mexico: Transit workers threaten to strike

The alliance of Mexican transit workers (ATM) is threatening to strike for a 10 percent wage increase. The strike would affect Mexico City's surface rapid light rail and trolleybus transit system that covers 450 km and employees 2,800 workers.

In addition to the wage increase, the workers are demanding that there be no layoffs and that no positions be destroyed.

If a contract agreement is not reached, the strike would begin on January 21 and affect some 550,000 daily riders.

Bolivian miners protest sackings

The Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers carried out a 24-hour strike on January 9 to protest layoffs in privately owned mines. The union accuses owners of forcing miners to retire against their will. The federation represents 15,000 miners.

There are no exact figures on how many miners have been forced out in this manner. One union leader cited the Glencore mine subsidiary Sinchi Wayra, which has sacked scores of workers. In some instances miners have been asked to work 12-hour shifts. When they refuse, they are laid off without pay.

The unions are demanding that Bolivian President Evo Morales nationalize those mines that lay workers off. As an alternative, union leaders have said miners should take direct control of those mines. The nation's privately owned tin mines have been severely affected by the collapse of world tin prices.

Tennessee aircraft manufacturer threatens strikers

Vought Aircraft Industries told some 900 striking machinists that it will hire permanent replacements at its Nashville, Tennessee plant unless they return to work immediately. The ultimatum came in a January 3 letter to members of the International Association of Machinists Local 735, that said in part, "The strike has now continued for 14 weeks, and we have no indications to conclude that it will be resolved any time soon... We need new employees who will join us on a permanent basis."

Vought has already hired 500 temporary workers and brought in 80 workers from other plants in its chain. The threat comes after December talks failed and with new talks set for January 13. The strike was provoked by a company proposal to cancel pensions for workers with less than 16 years seniority and substitute a 401(k).

The *Tennessean* quoted striker James Stewart, "I will lose my house, I will lose everything; I will not be a scab. We go out together, we go back in together." Local 735 President Mike Worrell merely responded to the replacement threat, saying, "We knew they had the right to do that."

Vought, which makes wings and tail sections for Airbus, Gulfstream and military aircraft, is 90 percent owned by the Carlyle Group.

One-day notice in Michigan factory closure

Members of the Teamsters complain their union abandoned them after Illinois-based United Fixtures laid them off with only 24 hours notice. About 50 employees at the company's plant in Niles, Michigan were affected.

Employees say the company violated federal laws and their union agreement. The company, which manufactures industrial storage and shelving units, has left the employees without benefits and owed as much as five weeks vacation pay.

Former worker Richard Adams told WSBT News1, "I have two kids. Medical, all that is taken away. I have nothing now." Workers indicated that the company is supposed to give a 60-day notice under the Federal WARN Act.

Many workers expressed frustration with the Teamsters Local 7. One worker stated, "Somebody from our local should be here now. We don't have anyone here to support us at all."

Union and company discuss terms of return-to-work in Michigan strike

Officials from Teamsters Local 406 are in talks with representatives from Metalworks over a counteroffer made by the Ludington, Michigan furniture maker to settle the two-month strike. Back in December the union made a return-to-work proposal based on acceptance of the company's original wage proposal.

Metalworks is also seeking a lower-tier wage scheme. Workers originally rejected the company's initial offer in October by a 137-2 margin and voted 127-17 to strike.



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