

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Chile: Police attack May Day protest

On May 1, International Workers Day, 10,000 workers marched through the streets of Santiago to protest against draft legislation that, in the name of labor flexibility, would allow companies to hire non-union labor when a strike is in progress. Toward the end of the march, police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas and water cannons; dozens were arrested.

Unemployment in Chile has reached 9.2 percent of the labor force, or about 670,000 workers.

## Puerto Rican government workers protest layoffs

Thousands of workers flooded the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May Day to protest the announced layoff of 30,000 government workers. "Workers are saying that there are other ways of solving this fiscal crisis. People marching on the streets are demanding that they be allowed to work," declared Jesús Días Allende, a government worker who participated in the march.

The marchers also denounced government plans to cancel previously negotiated wage and benefit increases. The protest march was organized by the Broad Solidarity and Struggle Front (FASyL), a coalition of 22 unions.

The protest began with a rally at the Labor Department in San Juan. In addition to FASyL supporters, it included members of the Independent Union of Electrical Workers (UTIER) and the Federation of Puerto Rican teachers (FMPR).

May 1 is not a holiday in Puerto Rico. The public sector

employees, however, took the day off in a one-day strike to repudiate the layoffs and the government's plan to privatize major state enterprises. In addition to public employees, firefighters and bus drivers also joined the walkout.

## Dominican workers march, demand wage increases

Members of Dominican labor organizations commemorated International Labor Day by marching through the streets of Santo Domingo. Union leaders also declared their intention to convene a general strike in 15 days, unless the government addresses their wage demands.

Dominican workers are demanding an increase of 40 percent for all those who earn less than \$558 a month, and 25 percent for those workers who earn \$558 to \$833 a month. In addition, the marchers are demanding the government create a social security system that provides universal health insurance. Many workers carried signs demanding that the government place price controls on consumer goods.

Floridan de la Rosa, member of the miners union at the Falconbridge Dominicana Mine, reported that the company has laid thousands of workers off. He declared, "The Dominican worker has been badly hit in part because management defies labor law."

## Mexico: Workers defy government order canceling May Day marches

In an open defiance to the sanitation alert imposed by the government in response to the swine flu epidemic, thousands of teachers supporting the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) marched in the streets of Oaxaca, Acapulco, and Cuernavaca protesting the so-called Alliance for Quality Education (ACE), a government program that, like No Child Left Behind in the United

States, subjects teachers to arbitrary standards and attacks teachers' rights.

In Oaxaca, the Popular Assembly of the Oaxacan People (APPO), a coalition of community and labor organizations, also took to the streets. The protesters declared they would petition Governor Ulises Ruiz, demanding more resources for infrastructure projects. Protesters also demanded freedom for all political prisoners.

In Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, over 5,000 steel workers also defied the stay-at-home order by President Calderon and Mayor Mariano Ortega Sánchez and took to the streets to protest the ongoing repression of the Mexican Miners Union.

In Guadalajara municipal employees joined teachers, students and members of the Independent Union Movement in a march and rally at the municipal palace.

Likewise, in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, a march through downtown streets took place that included members of non-governmental organizations, former braceros, and teachers who were joined by agricultural workers from El Paso, Texas.

### **Washington state carpenters protest low pay at Wal-Mart site**

Union carpenters picketed the construction site of a new Wal-Mart store in Yakima, Washington, to protest the failure of contractors to pay prevailing wages. Members of Carpenters Local 770 charge that Paras Concrete is paying workers who prepare concrete forms merely one-third the wages and benefits that union carpenters receive.

The union charges Paras with paying its workers \$12.50 an hour with no benefits under conditions where union carpenters received a combined wage and benefit package that totals about \$35.00 an hour.

### **Cornell University workers and students rally to support campus workers**

Workers and students at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, marched and chanted at a noontime rally April 28 to call attention to the upcoming contract negotiations between the administration and the union representing staff workers.

Christopher Duni, a Cornell student and member of Cornell Organization for Labor Action (COLA), told the

campus paper *Daily Sun* that the university was remaining “hush, hush” about negotiations. “While most students and faculty support the workers’ demand[s] for a fair contract, they are not on campus in June during the negotiations. Also, most dining workers, Cornell’s lowest paid employees, are [unemployed] in the summer. It is a challenge for them to voice their opinions when they are not on campus regularly.”

Mary Opperman, Cornell’s vice president for human resources and lead negotiator for the administration, said that the university’s current financial constraints “will be a significant factor for us this time,” indicating that the administration will seek to make workers suffer the consequences of budget shortfalls.

### **Vancouver truckers to strike**

Around 140 truck drivers who own and operate their own vehicles will halt shipping through the ports of Vancouver with strike action this week.

The drivers, who are members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), haul goods for at least 26 companies, many of which have signed new contracts with the union. But 2 companies in particular are refusing to sign.

The outstanding issue reportedly is payment for the movement of empty containers. The truckers, whose contract expired in December, were in a legal strike position as of May 4, but Port Metro Vancouver has said it will remain open regardless of any job action and has threatened to cancel the permits of any drivers that picket on their property.



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