

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Mexico: Sonora University employees return to work**

The membership of the Union of Workers and Employees at Sonora University (STEUS) voted on Saturday to accept a management offer and return to work, ending a strike that lasted 57 days. The decision was opposed by more than 30 percent of the strikers—780 voted in favor and 325 voted against the proposal, with 200 others not voting.

According to the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*, the university employees voted for an agreement that falls far short of their original demands because of the hardship that they suffered from the long strike. STEUS bureaucrat Dorotea Rascón, who is also an official of the Party for the Democratic Revolution (PRD), pushed through the deal. The strikers were isolated on May 14 when the Union of Academic Employees (STAUS) postponed its strike.

The non-academic employees of the university walked off their jobs on April 3, originally demanding a wage increase of 25 percent. In the end they settled for a 220 peso rise in general store vouchers (US \$15), an 800 peso one-time bonus and a 4.5 percent raise, only 0.25 percentage points above the original university offer.

## **Strike continues after Chilean educators reject government offer**

Friday, May 29, marked the 11th day of a strike by 80,000 public school teachers in Chile. No agreement has been reached with the government of Michelle Bachelet, and the strike continues. The main issue in the dispute is a one-time bonus. The teachers are demanding that the government add more than 1 million pesos (US\$2,080) to the bonus offer, about twice the government's offer of two payments of 250,000 pesos each (US\$445.) Eighty percent of the educators opposed the government offer in a recent ballot.

Jaime Gajardo, president of the Association of Teachers (Colegio de Profesores), denounced the government for refusing to negotiate.

## **Puerto Rican government announces massive layoffs**

The Puerto Rican government announced last Friday that 7,816 public employees are to be sacked. This will be the first round of layoffs that could result in 30,000 terminations this year. The layoffs are part of Governor Luis Fortuño's plan to reduce a government budget deficit of \$3.2 billion. The first round of layoffs is expected to take place by July 10.

On May 9, thousands of workers marched through the streets of San Juan promising to strike if the governor went ahead with the sackings. The measure would increase the island's unemployment rate, which recently reached 14.7 percent.

At the Medical School in the Southern City of Ponce, authorities announced a program to forestall a wave of suicides as the layoffs take place. José Enrique Cangiano, who works at the Medical School, explained, "Taking the economic circumstances we are living through, in the socio-economic structure that surrounds us, the unemployment that these layoffs will produce

places additional stress and could lead to suicides.”

“We need to preempt this because the suicide problem is getting worse,” he said.

### **Tentative agreement in Pennsylvania school strike**

The Crestwood School District and the union representing 118 school support workers reached a tentative agreement May 24 under a court-ordered weekend bargaining session. Members of the Crestwood Educational Support Professionals Association struck May 18 for the first time since their contract expired eight years ago. Four days later a Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, judge ordered an end to the strike and mandated immediate negotiations.

The new four-year proposal calls for 4 percent wage increases in each year of the new agreement. Also included are retroactive pay and bonuses, but these are not incorporated into base pay rates. However, union members for the first time will contribute 1 percent of their salary, or up to 4 percent of health insurance premiums. Deductible rates will also increase.

The contract still needs to be approved by the Crestwood school board. Union members are expected to vote on the proposal in the next week.

### **Salt Lake City, Utah: Four industrial accidents in a week**

Four workers were involved in separate industrial accidents during the course of a week in Salt Lake City, Utah.

On May 29, a 66-year-old truck driver for Amsco Windows was fighting for his life after being injured when a three-ton load of PVC window frames fell on top of him. Warehouse workers rushed to remove the PVC while ambulance personnel sped the unconscious victim to University of Utah Medical Center.

On May 28, the 50-year-old owner of Rocky Mountain Construction Services was killed when a mining storage silo at Marblehead Quarry came

crashing down on him. The owner and two other workers had just finished using cutting torches to demolish a 100,000-pound silo and were preparing to move away when the structure collapsed.

On May 27, a 23-year-old man’s arm was torn off above the elbow when it became entangled in a conveyer system at Asphalt Materials, Inc. The worker managed to turn the machine off and was later discovered by a co-worker.

On May 21, a female construction worker was sucked into the auger of a concrete paving machine, suffering severe chest and stomach injuries. The worker was cleaning the machine at the time, and it is not known how the accident occurred. Nearby construction workers reversed the auger and pulled her out.

### **Container plant locks out workers**

Picket lines went up May 25 at Vulcan Containers Ltd. in Petrolia, Ontario, east of Sarnia, after the company locked out 21 workers the previous day in a dispute for a new contract in which the company is reportedly demanding wage cuts of 15 percent.

Vulcan Containers produces steel drums. The workers are members of the Canadian Auto Workers Union. Their last contract expired in November 2008, and conciliated talks broke down late last month. In addition to wage cuts the company is seeking a 40 percent cut in hours as well as cuts to benefits, holidays and pensions. Workers have been on partial layoff since December, working only 24 hours a week. The company maintains that a fall-off in business is behind its concession demands.



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