

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Tens of thousands march in defense of Mexican utility workers**

Union members, students and their supporters marched on October 15 in Mexico City to protest the sacking of 44,000 electricians and the closure of Luz y Fuerza Centro, the electricity provider for Mexico City and Central Mexico. The company was dissolved by President Felipe Calderón last week.

Most of the protesters were laid-off Luz y Fuerza Centro employees. The massive march through downtown Mexico City ended at a rally in the city's Central Square. According to a police estimate, 150,000 people attended the demonstration.

## **Peruvian authorities ban national strike**

The Peruvian Labor Ministry banned a general strike planned by the Federation of Miners and Metal Workers (FNTMMSP). The protest strike is to take place on October 19 and 20. Labor Secretary Manuela García appealed to workers not to take part in this strike and threatened to withhold the wages of any worker that did not report for work.

The FNTMMSP has been planning this strike for more than a month to demand that the government approve a retirement law for miners plus legislation that beefs up workers' benefits. Government authorities do not consider those issues sufficient grounds for a legal strike since they don't include any specific wage proposals.

## **Brazilian zinc miners threaten to strike**

Votorantim Metais smelter workers in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais state, are deciding whether or not to strike over wages. The workers are demanding an 8.5 percent raise while the company is offering 4.45 percent, barely enough to cover inflation.

Union leader Geraldo Werneck indicated that, barring any progress in negotiations this week, a strike is inevitable. Votorantim employees will take a strike vote this week. The Juiz de Fora plant employs 400 workers.

## **Chile: Public School teachers demand wages lost during the Pinochet dictatorship**

Last Friday teachers in the municipality of Santiago declared that they intend to launch a strike unless the government pays a debt left over from the military dictatorship. According to current calculations, were the debt to be repaid today, each educator would receive US\$8,000-18,000.

The Chilean government has refused to recognize the 1981 debt, claiming that it has been long "extinguished." "While teachers suffered during the dictatorship, much like all other workers, there are no pending obligations with them," Carolina Tohá, secretary general of the government ministry, said last week. "Chile has worked hard to provide decent conditions, dignity and quality living standards for all workers," she added.

## **Stella D'Oro shuts down New York bakery, lays off 135**

The full workforce of 135 bakery workers were permanently laid off on October 8 from Stella D'Oro, which has made Italian baked goods in the Bronx borough of New York City for more than 75 years. They were abruptly told to collect their personal belongings and leave.

Workers staged a brief demonstration on the factory floor, chanting, "Workers united will never be defeated." Afterwards

they left the bakery. Some, with decades working at Stella, had tears in their eyes.

Beginning in August 2008, the Stella workers had struck for 11 months against concession demands made by a Connecticut-based private equity firm that had bought out the company. They returned to work in July after a National Labor Relations Board ruling that the financial firm, Brynwood Partners, had bargained in bad faith, continuing operations with scab labor although the union, Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 50, had offered to return to work under the old contract.

Having acquired the Stella D'Oro brand in 2006, Brynwood Partners provoked the strike by demanding that wages be cut from \$18 to \$13 an hour; the elimination of all sick days, a week of vacation and four holidays; and that employees pay a premium on health care. Having failed to force through these take-backs, Brynwood has shut down the bakery and sold the name to Lance, Inc., a snack food maker, which said it will transfer the machinery to a plant in Ashland, Ohio.

### **Washington state hospital workers hold one-day strike**

Several hundred health care workers at Providence St. Peters Hospital in Olympia, Washington carried out a one-day strike October 15 to protest benefit cuts and substandard wage increases. The Service Employees International Union Local 1199NW, which represents housekeepers, dietary nurses, clerks, health unit coordinators, licensed practical nurses and surgical technicians, charges that hospital management is increasing workers' portion of health care costs that in some cases could double or even triple their burden. Workers are also opposed to plans to replace the current pension program that has defined benefits and substitute Individual Retirement Accounts that will be subject to gyrations of the stock market.

The demand for sacrifices by workers comes as the hospital has confirmed earnings of \$14.2 million during the first six months of 2009. Contract talks broke off October 5 and no new talks are scheduled.

### **Forty-month strike broken at Indiana musical instrument factory**

Strikers at the Vincent Bach factory in Elkhart, Indiana ended picketing and closed down their strike headquarters last week, bringing to a close their 40-month strike against concessions. On August 4, a legal battle spanning several months over a decertification vote was resolved and replacement workers

voted out United Auto Workers Local 364. During the course of the strike, union members clashed with the UAW bureaucracy, which isolated the strike.

The brass musical instrument manufacturer, first established in the 1920s, was purchased in 1993 by two investment bankers, protégés of junk-bond operator Michael Milken. Management would ultimately slash jobs from 450 to 234 while increasing production and boosting profits. In 2006, facing competition from China, management demanded pay cuts of \$6 an hour, mandatory overtime and that workers shoulder the burden of increased health care costs.

### **Nova Scotia colleges set to strike**

Nearly 1,000 instructors at 13 community colleges across the province could be on strike by Tuesday, October 20, if a deal isn't reached before that deadline.

NDP Premier Darrell Dexter has indicated that the province will not budge from its offer of a 1 percent wage increase while the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) is asking for the same deal given to public school teachers, including a 2.9 percent wage increase and improvements to medical benefits.

Even though the union has offered to accept binding arbitration, the province has been reluctant to agree to the process, insisting on setting limits in advance. The college instructors have been without a contract since August of 2008.



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