

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Paraguay: Court employees threaten to strike

Employees of the Paraguayan court system threatened on Friday to strike in response to the rejection by the Senate of their wage demands.

On November 18, the Union of Paraguayan Court Employees (SIFJUPAR) ended a three-week strike on the basis of a senator's promise that the Senate would act on their 10 percent raise request. The same senator, Alfredo Jaeggli, opposed the raise on the Senate floor on November 26.

SIFJUPAR represents 4,500 court workers.

Paraguayan teachers strike

Public school teachers walked off their jobs on November 24. The issues behind the strike are wages and working conditions. On November 25, thousands of teachers marched and rallied at the legislature in Asunción.

The Paraguayan Educators' Federation (FEP), which represents 240,000 teachers, is demanding a 10 percent wage increase. The walkout coincides with the last two weeks of the Paraguayan public school calendar.

Argentine airline workers strike

Dozens of flights were canceled by LAN Airlines on November 27 as a result of a strike against the domestic carrier. The strike affected Argentina's two biggest airports, Aeroparque and Ezeiza, both located in Buenos Aires.

The strike by the Association of Airline Cabin Attendants (ATCPEA) was over wages and union recognition. The union accuses LAN of having marginalized it in contract negotiations and asked to become part of a government ordered mandatory arbitration.

The Argentine Labor Ministry ordered the arbitration in the wake of a November 12, nine-hour walkout by four of the airline's unions, representing pilots, navigators, technicians and supervisors.

LAN management responded to the ATCPEA demand by declaring that the conflict was not with the airline but between ATCPEA and the Labor Ministry. The one-day strike was lifted after the Ministry agreed to include ATCPEA in the negotiations.

San Francisco city workers arrested during job protest

Eighteen people were arrested November 23 for blocking traffic on San Francisco's Market Street as hundreds protested the decision by the city's mayor, Gavin Newsom, to lay off city employees and institute wage cuts. "Mayor Newsom has decided to do 500 layoffs and wage cuts," Service Employees International Union (SEIU) member Carlos Rivera told KTVU.

Among those being affected are school district and city health care workers. "The jobs [are] cut first and then they are offered another position with another name, but it's the exact same position with just another

name on it and less pay,” said certified nurse Debbie Dobson.

Workers charge that federal stimulus funds, due next April, could be used to cover current funding gaps.

The 18 protesters were arrested for obstructing traffic and then released.

New York City mayor announces attacks on teachers

New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg called for a number of initiatives aimed at scapegoating teachers for the deteriorating conditions in the city and its school districts. In a speech November 25, Bloomberg called for extending the use of student test scores as a way to deny tenure and to fire teachers.

Bloomberg is seeking support from the state legislature to implement the proposal statewide. Federal stimulus financing through grants under the “Race to the Top” program is tied to states implementing merit pay. State Senate Democrat Austin Shafran replied to Bloomberg’s speech by saying, “We’re committed to exploring any avenues to bring in increased federal funding to the state.”

Bloomberg also indicated he will shut down 10 percent of the city’s lowest-performing schools. To date, Bloomberg has shut down 91 schools throughout New York City.

Railway engineers strike

Following the collapse of contract talks late Friday, 1,700 locomotive engineers employed by Canadian National Railway (CN) went on strike November 28.

Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), which represents the strikers, called the strike after the company imposed a concessions contract on its workers. The contract included a 1.5 percent wage increase, but with a 500-mile increase in the distance engineers are required to cover each month, this would translate into a seven-day workweek with no overtime

pay.

It is not clear to what extent the company will be able to maintain operations across the country, although commuter service in the Montreal area will be maintained due to a court injunction imposed the day the strike took effect.

Court backs Wal-Mart against union

In what the union is calling a “technical victory” for the company, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled in support of Wal-Mart’s decision to close its outlet in Jonquière, Quebec in 2005. Workers at the outlet voted in 2004 to join the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), making it one of the first Wal-Marts to be unionized in North America.

One hundred ninety workers lost their jobs as a result of the closure, which immediately followed union certification. The court challenge has been ongoing since that time. The court ruled 6 to 3 that the workers’ rights were not violated because the case was brought by the union under the wrong section of the labor code. The court denied the union’s application to argue the case as a Charter rights issue.

While the court held that no law existed to compel a company to stay open, it left open the possibility that workers could seek compensation if it could be proven that Wal-Mart engaged in unfair labor practices.



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