

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 April 2010

Mexico: Electricians on hunger strike

Members of the Mexican electricians union (SME) launched a hunger strike in Mexico City's central square (the *Zócalo*) on April 25. The union is demanding the reinstatement of 44,000 sacked workers at LFC, the electric utility shut down by the Calderón government last October 11. The purpose of the shutdown, which was imposed by presidential decree, was to weaken the SME and pave the way for the privatization of electric utilities. The SME has petitioned the courts, charging that the government measure is unconstitutional.

At the time, the sacked workers were urged to accept severance pay and withdraw any claims to an LFC job in return for a vague promise of reemployment.

The turn to this desperate and futile form of protest flows from the union's isolation of the electricians despite the popular support they enjoy in the working class. Last year tens of thousands miners, telephone, workers, students and others turned out for mass demonstrations in Mexico City to oppose the mass layoffs of LFC workers and the closure of the state utility.

University authorities denounced students for allegedly attacking security guards and initially signaled they would use this as a pretext to not negotiate with the strike committee. The melee took place when security guards attempted to stop groups of students from closing entrance gates. On Thursday, the Association of University Professors (APPU) announced that its members supported the students and that they would join the strike this week.

The issue in the strike is the US \$100 million budget cut being planned for the 11 campuses of the UPR system this year as part of draconian budget cuts being instituted by the administration of Governor Luis Fortuño who fired 20,000 public sector workers last year.

The students are demanding the repeal of Certification 98, which limits and in some cases eliminates tuition waivers for students, as well as guarantees there will be no tuition increases and privatization of services or campuses. Students at two other campuses, Humacao and Utuai, are also on strike, while students at the Bayamón campus plan to meet this week to take a strike vote.

Chilean dockworkers strike

Puerto Rico: Student strike shuts down university

Puerto Rican students occupied and shut down the Rio Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico on April 21 to fight drastic budget cuts. The campus is the largest in the island's university system. The strike, which was originally planned to last 48 hours, has been extended.

Dockworkers employed by Portuaria Patache walked off their jobs on April 18, paralyzing the loading and unloading of ships at the northern port of Iquique. The walkout began when management refused to negotiate wage increases and profit-sharing bonuses. This is the workers' first attempt at a collective agreement. Portuaria Patache services the TMMP marine terminal that handles mineral cargo out of the port.

California teachers strike against pay cuts

Teachers in Capistrano Unified School District in Orange County became the first section of California instructors to launch a strike against statewide pay cuts starting April 23. The district's 2,200 teachers voted to strike after school board negotiators imposed 10 percent pay cuts to make teachers pay for a \$34 million budget gap. Negotiations on Saturday failed to resolve the conflict and were followed up by talks on Sunday.

The leadership of the Capistrano Unified Education Association objected to the board's insistence that the cuts in pay and benefits be permanent and instead held out for temporary cuts that would expire June 30, 2011, and be restored if new state funding materialized, a shaky proposal given the state's economic crisis.

Orange County, comprised of 27 school districts of which Capistrano is the second largest, is driving to slash a total of \$364 million for the 2010-2011 school year. Currently, California has some 100 school districts that have reached impasses with their teachers' unions as they seek to impose similar concessions to those at Capistrano.

Teamsters halt Seattle trash haulers strike

Some 450 Seattle-area trash haulers ended their two-day strike April 22 and will resume bargaining this week with Waste Management, the nation's largest private garbage disposal service. The strike could have affected trash collection and recycling for some one million customers of King and Snohomish Counties.

Teamsters Local 174 objected to Waste Managements' refusal to provide medical benefits equivalent to those contained in other contracts for trash haulers who work for Allied Waste and CleanScapes. Waste Management is demanding workers increase monthly medical payments from \$30 to \$50. The company is offering a \$2.80 wage hike over the course of 5 years.

At the beginning of April, the Teamsters rejected Waste Managements "last, best and final offer." Last week the union asked for a clarification of the company's last offer but rejected the company's request for a reopening of talks on the basis of substantive negotiations. Under the return to work, the Teamsters agreed to unconditionally return to the bargaining table.

Paper workers sue union over lost jobs

Eight former workers at a New Brunswick pulp and paper mill are suing the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) and its former head Buzz Hargrove for selling out their jobs in a contract with the employer two years ago.

When their mill closed in 2006 the CAW worked out an agreement with a new owner to reopen the facility. Workers ratified the pact believing they would be called back to work after almost two years off the job. What the union didn't tell them was that the new contract did not protect seniority rights and that many of the older workers would be out of a job.

The affected workers allege they were not only lied to about seniority provisions by the CAW but on that basis were convinced to make other concessions. Hargrove and other union leaders are expected to testify in their own defence this week.



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