

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 May 2010

## **Bolivia: Teachers reject 5 percent pay hike, march in protest**

Teachers protesting a meager 5 percent pay raise decreed by President Evo Morales marched and blockaded streets in downtown La Paz April 30. The teachers denounced the raise as inadequate, and shouted chants critical of the government's plans to buy Russian missiles and a presidential plane. Shouting, "Airplanes no, wages yes! Missiles no, wages yes!" about 4,000 teachers blocked traffic and brought downtown La Paz to a standstill.

The raise applies to both the public and private sector. Morales had previously asked for understanding from the unions representing teachers, health workers, factory workers and policemen, claiming that his administration intends to invest money in new industries.

The blockade was augmented by a separate contingent of bus drivers protesting ongoing conflicts between the government and residents of Caravani, a town along the highway between La Paz and the Amazon region. The residents are blockading the highway to "demand that the government fulfill its promise to build a processing plant for citric fruit there," according to *Efe* news service.

Police officers did not participate in the protest, but have said that they would launch their own massive protests on Monday if their demand for a 25 percent wage increase was not met.

## **Costa Rica hit by nationwide protests**

Costa Rica saw protests around the nation April 29 and 30 by teachers, port workers, city workers, taxi drivers and others. The protests resulted in 20 arrests. The municipal employees, some of whom were among the 20 arrested, marched against a new law privatizing some of Limón's city services.

In the east coast city of Limón, workers protested the planned privatization of the ports in the name of modernization. Unknown assailants burned seven trucks and attacked cargo truck drivers. According to reports, three police officers were also wounded in the protests.

In the capital city of San José, teachers protested the proposed imposition of a unified pay scale on public sector workers, "a measure they fear would cost them hard-won gains, such as their annual Christmas bonus," according to *Efe*.

In a separate action, unregulated taxi drivers blockaded traffic along San José's main streets to oppose a bill that would more stringently regulate their work.

## **Chile: Police attack demonstrators at May Day actions**

Police used water cannons and tear gas on protestors during Chile's International Workers Day activities Saturday. Over 150 people were arrested at a demonstration in Santiago called by the CUT federation and other unions. The protest drew about 8,000 demonstrators, according to official estimates.

Protestors mobilized over a number of issues, including the nation's minimum wage, equivalent to about US\$320 per month; the massive layoffs—under the country's

*fuera mayor* law—following the February 27 earthquake; and the high unemployment rate, expected to rise above 10 percent this year.

The *Santiago Times* reported Friday that “This will be the first Workers Day during the Piñera presidency, and the union says it does not feel completely heard by the new government.” However, the CUT is part of a government-created “advisory committee” that will decide how much to raise the minimum wage. CUT President Arturo Martínez told the *Times*, “Our goal in participating is to put forth our views so that the issue’s discussion is fully informed.”

### **Missouri workers strike pharmaceutical plant**

Workers at the Covidien plant in St. Louis, Missouri, walked off the job Friday night after talks between the pharmaceutical company and union broke down. According to United Auto Workers Local 1887, which represents 420 workers at the struck plant, management wants to cut medical benefits and pensions while altering overtime, working conditions and seniority.

Covidien has announced it will use replacement workers in an effort to break the strike. “[W]e are unable to continue operating with these employees in the absence of an updated labor agreement,” said a company statement. The plant has existed for nearly 100 years. Tyco International purchased it in 2000. In 2006, the company was broken up, with its healthcare division established under the name Covidien.

### **Philadelphia nurses end strike, ratify contract**

Nurses and technical staff at Temple University Hospital accepted a new contract and returned to work April 29, bringing their 28-day strike to a close. The new agreement was ratified by a 97 percent margin, with 1,075 members out of the 1,500 workforce voting.

Originally hospital management had insisted on a 4 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement. The new pact called for a wage freeze in the

first year followed by annual increases of 2, 2.5 and 3 percent and a signing bonus of \$800. The union had been demanding an increase of 14.5 percent.

The contract did not include cuts in shift and weekend differential rates originally sought by management. The hospital also dropped a gag clause barring officials of the Pennsylvania Association of Skilled Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP) from making negative public comments about the hospital.

PASNAP has filed a claim with the state agency in charge of unemployment compensation. The union has accused Temple management of dropping a tuition reimbursement benefit before the strike—a violation of labor law. If the state rules on behalf of the union, the strike would be converted into a lockout, making nurses eligible for an average of \$551 a week in unemployment benefits. Such a decision could make Temple University liable for up to \$1.5 million dollars.

### **Toronto paper facing strike**

Seventy editorial and production staff at *Metro* daily newspaper in Toronto are set for a strike or possibly a lockout if a last minute deal is not reached before a Friday midnight deadline.

The workers’ first contract under the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) expired in March, and the company is demanding sweeping concessions on wages and benefits in any new contract. The company has rejected a union demand for a wage grid reflecting the skills of its members.

*Metro* is the largest free daily newspaper in Canada, published in virtually every major city. It is owned by Torstar, one of the largest newspaper conglomerates in the country.



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