

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Chile: Public sector workers plan mobilizations

In the midst of salary talks with the Ministry of Finance, officials of Chile's National Association of Fiscal Employees (ANEF) called for mobilizations to take place on June 7. Calling the government's proposed raise of 2.5 percent "an unacceptable figure," the association's president Raúl de la Puente said that the unions agreed to show their displeasure, although they would continue bargaining with government negotiators. ANEF demands 8 percent and 10 percent increases for monthly salaries under 800,000 pesos (US\$1,479).

Private sector employers—and their workers—are watching for a precedent that could arise from the negotiations. The president of the Society for Industrial Development (Sofofa), Andrés Concha, called the government's offer "reasonable," claiming that "we have to be calm and patient; things are moving forward...but we shouldn't rush things." Another employers' spokesman, Rafael Guilisasti, said that "the most important thing...is to respect the law." Guilisasti continued, "I have heard that public employees have no right to strike and should keep within the framework of the negotiations."

Minister of Labor Claudia Serrano claimed the call for a strike, which would be extended by 48 hours, would not contribute to dialogue between the parties. The unions do not agree with the rationale given by the ministry for the small proposed increase: a projected negative inflation rate in the coming months.

In related news, some ANEF members recently marched with over 4,000 students in Santiago to protest changes in education policy pushed by the government of right-wing billionaire Sebastian Piñera. Clashes with the police resulted in several injuries.

De la Puente joined the march, where he denounced layoffs of government workers as well as "a business right that today dismisses public sector workers and jeopardizes the quality of education."

The demonstrators were joined by dozens of Education Ministry workers who were engaged in a two-day strike protesting the dismissal of colleagues, according to EFE news service. EFE reported that "ANEF says that more than 500 employees of the education and culture ministries have been fired for political reasons since Piñera took office."

Chile: Lumber workers strike and blockade sawmill

Workers at the Mulchén Sawmill, located about 20 miles south of the south-central city of Los Ángeles, launched a strike May 31, followed by a blockade on June 2. Sindicato 1, which represents 136 operators, voted for the strike on May 30 after rejecting the company's proposal of a monthly increase of 5,000 pesos (US\$9.34), which the company claimed was in accord with the consumer price index. The union had requested a raise of 20,000 pesos, or US\$37.37.

The company immediately branded the strike and blockade "illegal and arbitrary" and complained that it impeded the free passage of the other 330 employees. In a communiqué, parent company CMPC Maderas said it would "resort to all legal means to reestablish production," reported *El Mercurio*.

Union president Sergio Cid told the daily that the union did not close off the possibility of negotiations with the company, but that they would remain firm in their demand.

Education workers begin series of protests in Oaxaca, Mexico

Members of the National Syndicate of Education Workers (SNTE) began a series of demonstrations in the central plaza of Oaxaca on May 31 to demand that state and federal authorities meet their petition for a salary increase and other demands. Teachers from all eight regions in the state began a plantón, or vigil, in the main square and vowed to maintain it on a rotating basis until the issues are resolved.

The first act of protest took place in the region of Tuxtepec, where around 8,000 elementary school teachers left their classes, to be relieved by substitutes from around the region.

Azael Santiago Chepi, secretary general of SNTE section 22, told *La Jornada* that "the acts of protest will include the peaceful occupation of government offices, the taking of toll booths on the Huitzo expressway and the removal of information regarding the July 4 elections in Oaxaca." He said that the union would also consider the options of boycotting the elections for governor, local congresses and mayors, as well as impeding the celebration of the Guelaguetza, the biggest official festival in Oaxaca. He said they hoped not to have to apply "stronger pressure measures."

The teachers' demands include: the start of negotiations next week in Oaxaca, which would include high government officials; the freeing of 300 million pesos (US\$23 million) for salaries in the fourth quarter; the

freeing of various teachers who were imprisoned for political reasons; punishment of those responsible for the violent removal of teachers from the main square on June 14, 2006.

BP workers attacked by Colombian army

Heavily-armed commandos from the Colombian army attacked striking workers at British Petroleum's Tauramena Central Processing Facility in Casanare on June 2, according to a June 4 *WW4 Report* article.

"The striking workers were employed by BP's contractors to build additional capacity at the plant to process natural gas from the nearby Cusiana field, allowing an increase of output to 300 million cubic feet a day, up from the current 230 million," according to the article. All the contract workers, who number 400, are on strike. "At night, workers sleep chained to machinery under temporary shelters as a precaution against any further attempts to forcibly remove them."

The article quoted Oscar García, a member of the National Oil Workers Union, as saying, "This shows how BP is bent on war against workers who are only demanding that their fundamental rights be respected."

Last February, Colombia's elite riot police attacked the striking BP contract workers when they started blockading access roads in response to the company's refusal to recognize and negotiate with the union.

Red Cross Workers strike across six states

Over 1,000 Red Cross workers represented by seven unions in six different states ended a three-day concerted strike last week to bring to light concessions and unsafe conditions at the world's largest blood collection agency. Workers began their walkout June 2 protesting a wide range of issues, including unsafe staffing levels, unilateral reductions in pensions, demands for cuts in healthcare, victimization of a union representative and the elimination of nurses and their replacement with non-professionals, endangering the blood collection process.

Red Cross workers have been without a contract since May 2009. Management insists that concession demands are dictated by financial problems.

In 2007 the company brought in \$2 billion in revenues. The company collects a majority of its blood product at no cost and then sells it to hospitals and other concerns. The unions involved pointed to the fact that US Food and Drug Administration has imposed \$21 million in fines on the Red Cross since 2003. In addition, there have been 231 recall incidents involving 7,363 unsuitable blood products that could have prevented through better practices.

The strike involved the Communications Workers of America; the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; the Office and Professional Employees International Union; Service Employees International Union; the Teamsters; and United Food and Commercial Workers. The states impacted were Connecticut, New York, West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, and California.

Service workers strike New York housing complex

Janitors, groundskeepers and parking attendants went on strike June 1 at the Co-op City housing project in the Bronx borough of New York. The 500 members of the Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ rejected an attempt by RiverBay Corporation, which manages the project, to freeze wages over four years and cut healthcare benefits.

RiverBay management charges that the union initiated the strike. But the SEIU claims RiverBay locked out workers. The strike has a major impact on the projects operations. Co-op City's 35 high-rise buildings that house 55,000 predominantly working class residents are capable of turning out 35-40 tons of garbage daily.

Despite the inconveniences, the *New York Times* reported residents were supportive of the workers. The paper quoted 84-year-old Vincent Matthews, saying, "We have to be sympathetic to the workers because we are workers ourselves. I'm not with management when it comes to guys standing out here."

Construction workers strike halts progress on Indiana Toll Road

Some 500 road construction workers went on strike on June 2 after their contract with Northwest Indiana Contractors Association expired. Talks broke down in late May after negotiators for contracting companies declined to discuss terms governing the length of a new agreement and wages.

Members of Iron Workers Local 395 are seeking a multiple-year contract and wage increases after signing a one-year agreement last year that froze wages. Strikers are upset over the fact that contractors have awarded wage increases for other crafts in the lead-up to the current negotiations. Besides Iron Workers, contractors are also in negotiations with unions representing four other trades.

Another 500 workers represented by the Teamsters and Operating Engineers honored the Iron Workers picket lines, resulting in a shutdown of construction on the Indiana Toll Road and Instate 80/94 between Gary and Michigan City. As a result, the stoppage is having an impact on commuters and other traffic, leading to delays and route changes.

Bank of America employees sue over back wages

Workers at Bank of America branches and call centers are suing for overtime and other wages they say they are owed by the giant financial institution. A lawsuit filed in Kansas City, Kansas, on June 4 consolidates 12 lawsuits by workers in California, Florida, Kansas, Texas and Washington. According to attorneys for the workers, the suit could eventually cover 180,000 employees.

Workers say the company, one of the largest US employers, fails to pay workers for overtime after 40 hours per week and for all straight time hours worked. They say the company forces employees to work through breaks, does not provide required break or meal time and fails to pay terminated employees earned pay or for accrued vacation time.

Hundreds of millions of dollars could be involved. An attorney for the plaintiffs said a typical worker has been deprived of \$1,000 to \$2,000 in pay.

Quebec teachers poised for strike

Public school teachers across the province of Quebec are set to stage a one-day strike on June 8 after unanimously rejecting a proposed deal last week.

Thirty-two thousand teachers in nine unions organized under the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) were involved in the strike vote. The union leadership has made it clear that it only wants to fire a “warning shot” to school board negotiators, saying terms reached in recent settlements with other bargaining units are unacceptable.

An appeal by Quebec school boards to have the strike ruled illegal was rejected over the weekend. Key issues in the dispute include class sizes, job security and student services.

Montreal city workers job action to close tourist sites

In an ongoing dispute, the union representing 5,500 Montreal city workers have announced that targeted strikes set for June 16 will force the indefinite closure of two popular tourist attractions—the Biodome and the Insectarium—to bring attention to the slow pace of negotiations. Workers have been without a contract since August of 2007.

This is the latest in a series of job actions staged by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents the city workers. The union has assured that staff will be provided for all essential services, and that they are willing to return to the bargaining table at any time before the strike deadline.

Saskatchewan casino workers strike

Four hundred twenty-five gaming workers at Casino Regina went on strike June 1 after being without a contract for almost a year.

The first strike in the casino’s 14-year history was called by the Public Service Alliance of Canada and another 300 food service workers employed at the casino who are members of a different union.

One of the central issues in the dispute is the workers’ demand for night shift wage premiums, which the casino has so far refused to grant. Casino management has stated that it will continue operations using managers, but at reduced hours.



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