

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 November 2005

Latin America

Cancún hotel workers protest layoffs

The Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), the union that represents Cancún hotel workers, denounced last week the layoff of over 300 hotel employees from the Hilton and Handai hotels and from Xcaret, an ecological park. The layoffs came despite assurances from the government of the State of Quintana Roo, in the Yucatan Peninsula, that no sackings would take place as a result of Hurricane Wilma.

CROC leaders are threatening to lead a walkout against the layoffs. Local CROC official Arturo Escaip indicated that unemployment is on the rise in this popular tourist destination and called on the government to explain how retraining scholarships will be doled out to the unemployed, given that hundreds of small businesses may be forced to close. Escaip denounced a maneuver by the hotel companies to temporarily suspend labor legislation, making it possible to keep thousands of employees unemployed for months.

The state governor, Félix González, had offered 37,500 retraining scholarships of 2000 pesos (US\$190) each to cover 45 days of training, a meager sum, even taking Mexico's lower cost of living into account. Escaip said that the mechanism for granting the payments has yet to be created. The denial by González and the Cancún hotel chains that there is no increase in unemployment in the region flies in the face of reality, according to the CROC. In addition to the 300 sackings already mentioned, the union has received over 500 grievances from hotel, restaurant, and travel agency employees.

Doctors strike continues in Uruguay

Uruguay's public health doctors went on strike last Thursday demanding higher wages and the resignation of the nation's public health minister, María Julia Muñoz. Negotiations are taking place mediated by the Labor Ministry.

However, officials of Uruguay's Medical Union (SMU) declared November 5 that it was likely the strike will continue and reported great support for the strikers, charging the Ministry of Public Health with intransigence in the negotiations.

Public health officials said that their budget cannot accommodate raises for the doctors. Muñoz denounced the doctors for striking and declared that the Health Ministry prioritizes the public's health needs above the wage demands of 15,000 doctors.

This is the sixth strike by public health doctors since current President Tavaré Vázquez took office on March 1.

Air traffic controllers strike in Perú

One hundred eighty air traffic controllers in Lima walked off their jobs November 3 to press their demand for back pay. Airport officials are attempting to run the system with management personnel.

United States

Philadelphia transit strike ends

More than 5,000 transit workers in Philadelphia began to return to work Monday morning after negotiators for the Southeastern

Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) and the unions reached a tentative settlement that ends the walkout that began one week ago. The agreement was announced by Governor Ed Rendell, flanked by SEPTA and union officials after an all-night bargaining session.

The strike was called by about 5,000 members of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 and about 300 suburban workers represented by the United Transportation Union Local 1594.

Many details of the agreement have not as of yet been made public. The most contentious issue in the struggle was SEPTA's demand that workers, who after two years and three months currently pay nothing towards their health care premiums, start contributing to the cost.

SEPTA was demanding that the current workforce pay 5 percent and new hires pay 10 percent towards their premiums. According to the announcement, workers will have to pay 1 percent and also accept some other demands from the transit agency. The union also claims to have won some work rule changes that it was seeking. Wages will increase 3 percent a year in a four-year contract. A spokesman for TWU Local 234 said the member ratification process will not begin for at least four days.

Another Machinist strike at Boeing

About 1,500 machinists for Boeing Corporation's Integrated Defense Unit in California, Alabama and Florida hit the picket lines November 3 in opposition to the aerospace company's attempt to end retiree health benefits and increase workers' medical out-of-pocket costs and premiums.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents the striking workers, is looking for a similar agreement to its counterparts who work for Boeing's commercial jet division and recently concluded a four-week strike. While not accepting benefit cuts, the IAM did conclude a backroom deal that imposed a three-year wage freeze.

Last week's strike delayed the launch of a Delta rocket at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California slated to carry NASA satellites. At Cape Canaveral in Florida, Boeing brought in replacement workers to finish the upper-stage booster of a rocket that will carry a spacecraft powered by 24 pounds of plutonium-238 that is scheduled to probe the planet Pluto.

Boeing management is currently in negotiations with engineers and technical workers who work for its commercial jet division and are represented by the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace.

Talks break off in Texas steel plant lockout

Negotiations between Gerdau Ameristeel and the United Steelworkers Local 8586 broke off November 11 after 11 months of negotiations. The 260 steelworkers at the company's Beaumont, Texas plant have been locked out since May of this year as the company is pressing hard for deep concessions.

The steelworkers union has already agreed to a two-tier wage

system and a break with the past practice of two-year agreements by extending the length of the new contract to four years. The company continues to press for combined insurance increases that will require workers to pay \$600 a month and changes in vacation and overtime pay provisions.

Gerdau Ameristeel is also in negotiations with representatives of the steelworkers union at plants in Wilton, Iowa and St. Paul, Minnesota.

Substantial “no” vote on New York City teachers pact

In results announced last Thursday, only 63 percent of New York City teachers voted to ratify a new contract with the city after working two and a half years without one. This compares with a 94 percent “yes” vote in 2002.

The one-third “no” vote reflected broader mounting anger among teachers. Indicative of rising tensions within the union, at the earlier vote of the Delegate Assembly the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) hired an outside security firm to “insure order.”

UFT President Randi Weingarten announced a settlement with Mayor Michael Bloomberg in time for Tuesday’s mayoral elections. While a couple of weeks ago the UFT was claiming its options were either a strike or an endorsement of the Republican Party mayor’s Democratic rival Fernando Ferrer, the UFT is now staying neutral in the election, despite Bloomberg’s longtime snubbing of the teachers union.

The contract does nothing to ameliorate conditions in New York’s overcrowded schools and classrooms. Weingarten, who is head of the Municipal Labor Council, chose to allow the city to deal with overcrowded classrooms by extending the workday rather than waging a fight for smaller pupil-teacher ratios. Two months after the school year began, arbitration approved teachers in some schools having over 40 students in their classrooms.

Under the settlement, a retroactive pay increase of 15 percent spread over 52 months will not make up for the inflation rate in a city notorious for high prices and rents. The raise actually represents compensation for the loss of three vacation days as well as 10 minutes per day extra working time. This is in addition to 20 minutes added in the previous contract. Many teachers believe that this prepares the way for teachers to be pushed from their present job of teaching five classes in the high schools to six, while elementary school teachers are now to be burdened with teaching an extra group of 10 children at the end of the day.

In addition, the expansion of a divisive “experiment” creating a new job category of “lead teacher” at a higher rate of “merit” pay is expected to drive teachers and schools to compete for rewards through increased test scores.

The termination of previously won protections will create more oppressive conditions. Teachers will no longer be able to grieve disciplinary letters put into their files by principals and seniority rights to voluntarily transfer to schools in the citywide system can be rejected by principals. Teachers may be placed in assignments patrolling hallways and student cafeterias instead of working on classroom related duties, such as meeting with students, calling parents, or marking homework and tests.

Strike against private contractor at Connecticut group homes

Workers at seven group homes and educational centers for the mentally retarded in Manchester, Vernon and Ellington, Connecticut ended a five-day strike November 2 without an agreement. The 126 workers, represented by the New England Health Care Union District 1199, struck over pay, health care and job assignment disagreements with New Seasons, a private contractor that runs some of the group

homes on behalf of the state of Connecticut.

Workers have been working without a contract since April when contracts covering a number of private contractors expired. District 1199 says it will send New Seasons another 10-day notice if no progress is made.

Canada

Slim majority ends Alberta meatpackers strike

Unionized employees at Lakeside slaughterhouse in Brooks, Alberta, ratified a four-year contract by a narrow margin of 56 percent. The bitter strike of 2,100 Lakeside employees, represented by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), began on October 12 after Tyson Foods, the company operating the slaughterhouse, rejected a provincial arbitrator’s settlement proposal. The strike quickly turned violent, with charges laid against 19 people on both sides, including managers and the union president.

The new contract, which is a first contract at the facility, provides a wage increase of \$1.60 over the length of the contract but does not include as much break time as the union had requested and prohibits strikes, lockouts, sympathy strikes, work stoppages or slowdowns.

Strike ends at Ontario metal plant

About 650 workers at Kidd Creek Metallurgical Division near Timmins, Ontario voted 82.5 percent to accept a new three-year contract on October 31, indicating an end to the four-week-long strike. The deal includes a 7 percent wage increase over three years and contract language that protects the existing benefits package. The workers are members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 599.

Manitoba school staff set to strike

On November 2, support staff at Turtle River School Division in Manitoba rejected their employer’s final contract offer, putting the union into a legal strike position. Negotiations have been ongoing since January, with the main issue being wage parity with workers in neighboring divisions. According to a union representative, the workers at the Turtle River division are paid \$2 an hour less than those in other divisions. The approximately 100 workers are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1897. They work as teaching assistants, secretaries, librarians, custodians, mechanics and bus drivers.



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