

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 February 2008

Latin America

Guatemalan teachers protest government intervention into union

This Thursday, thousands of Guatemalans will strike in protest against the government's attempt to remove union leader Joviel Acevedo. The strikers will march and rally in Guatemala City, demanding that President Álvaro Colom and Education Minister Ana Ordoñez stop the harassment of the union leader. Acevedo was brought up on charges for allegedly abandoning his post for union business. A labor court recommended that he be fired.

The teachers plan to rally at the Ministry of Education and petition the government. If the latter refuses to give in to the strikers' demands, the teachers may decide to continue their campaign by extending their strike and by blocking highways.

Dominican Republic: Public health doctors strike

Doctors employed in Dominican public hospitals went on strike February 21 to demand better wages and working conditions. The strike lasted 24 hours and was organized by the Dominican Physicians Union (CMD); it affected 170 hospitals and clinics in the country.

All services were shut down except for emergencies. The strike followed a decision by private physicians to cancel a similar strike. Private doctors are demanding an increase in fees paid by the Social Security system.

Public health doctors are demanding wage increases, better working conditions and a bigger budget allocation for public medical services.

Pilots strike in Argentina

Pilots employed by Austral Airlines in Argentina carried out a 24-hour strike last Friday to protest plans to cease investments in the company. Austral, a domestic carrier, is owned by the transnational company Marsans Group, based in Spain. The Group also controls Aerolíneas Argentinas, an international carrier. Union leaders fear that management plans to dissolve Austral.

Under the plan, Aerolíneas would take over Austral's routes. The pilots' union is demanding that all Austral jobs be protected and that both air carriers continue to operate independently of each other.

Austral currently leases six jets from Aerolíneas. The leases appear to have been cancelled.

United States

California caregivers strike over victimizations and loss of benefits

Caregivers at the Emmanuel Convalescent Hospital in Millbrae, California, carried out a 24-hour strike February 22 over violations by management of federal labor laws. The 87 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) charge that the new owners of the 140-bed facility fired eight pro-union workers and eliminated benefits for all workers.

Last August, new owners purchased the hospital and four other similar convalescent and assisted-living hospitals from Pleasant Care. The previous owners were compelled by the state attorney general to pay a \$1 million fine for elder abuse and criminally negligent care. The new owners began their tenure by cutting benefits for workers and, according to the SEIU, targeting workers for firing because of union activity.

Garrett Palines, a certified nursing assistant and one of the workers who were fired in October, told the *San Mateo Times*, "My house foreclosed, and I live in my van. I'm looking for any kind of job, but I need to come back to this job. I loved taking care of my patients."

Auto union calls police to remove opponents from meeting

Five former workers from the Freightliner plant near Cleveland, Ohio, were accused of trespassing when they attended the local monthly meeting of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 3520. One worker was arrested, and the other four left under the threat of arrest.

The five workers, including shop chairman Robert Whiteside, were involved in the launching of an April

2, 2007, strike at the Freightliner plant, which is part of the DaimlerChrysler Truck Group, after contract talks broke down. The UAW international intervened on the first day, charging the strike was not sanctioned by the UAW.

UAW Local 3520 President George Drexel called off the strike on its first day. The company fired a number of workers, all of whom were returned to their jobs except for the five. Drexel attempted to suspend the five from union positions and even put them on trial last November, but failed to remove them.

Drexel informed the five they were no longer members in good standing and called police to remove them as trespassers at the February 16 meeting.

Whiteside told the *Statesville Record-Landmark*, “Our membership dues were paid, and we were in good standing. We’ve never had any problems before. But we feel pretty certain that this was all planned ahead of time by the president.”

Canada

Victoria library workers locked out

Nearly 300 library workers in the provincial capital of Victoria, B.C., were locked out on February 17 after several months of limited job action in their fight to win a new contract.

The workers, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been in a legal strike position since September and have been without a contract for more than a year. The main issue in their dispute is pay equity. The union is trying to bring wages in line with library workers in Vancouver who struck for a new contract last year.

Leading up to the lockout, the job action at the nine Victoria area branches had been limited to token measures, such as refusing to collect fines. Employers cited workers’ refusal to collect fines to justify the lockout. Even by the employers’ own estimate, a new contract would only cost an additional \$1.8 million a year, but talks have broken off and no negotiations are currently scheduled.



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