

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Latin America

### Port strike in Haiti

Twelve hundred employees at Haiti's customs office declared themselves on strike on December 1 over wages. A week later, Port Au Prince longshoremen walked out in solidarity with the customs strike.

The customs employees are demanding a 100 percent increase in pay, from US\$190 to US\$380 per month.

Government authorities claim there is no money, and a humanitarian emergency exists because 380 containers of much-needed United Nations' food shipments have not been unloaded. The government of interim President Boniface Alexander blamed the strikers for the food crisis. Alexander was installed in February as a result of a military intervention by United States and French imperialism.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Its economy shrunk 5 percent this year; it has been collapsing since 2001 and now lags below the levels of 1991. It is also suffering from rampant inflation, resulting in strikes, protests and the collapse of business investments.

Brazilian troops, part of the international occupation force, have been deployed at the customs house and port to prevent further protests.

### Community college strike continues in Mexico City

The walkout by clerical employees at 20 community colleges in Mexico City is now in its second week. In addition to lack of progress over wages, the issue of compensation during the days of the strike is holding up a settlement. The 20 institutions serve 115,000 students and offer a mix of vocational and academic classes to a largely working class student body.

### Brazilian autoworkers end 12-day strike

Volkswagen workers in São Paulo concluded a 12-day strike after management agreed to a government-imposed raise of 18 percent. VW officials agreed to extend the settlement to all of their 20,000 employees at three Brazilian plants and make the raise retroactive to November 1.

Fourteen thousand VW workers went on strike at the São Bernardo do Campo plant, near São Paulo, on December 1,

to press for a wage increase that would keep pace with Brazil's annual inflation rate of about 16 percent. VW refused the workers' demands and took them to the labor court.

### Subway workers strike in Buenos Aires

On December 6, employees of Buenos Aires' extensive subway lines walked off their jobs during the morning and evening rush hours in response to the collapse of negotiations over wages. The workers acted in defiance of a Labor Ministry order for mandatory conciliation. The strike was part of the wage campaign launched by the motorized rail workers' union (UTA) at the beginning of December.

Subway workers are demanding a 55 percent raise plus a 2 percent seniority raise for each year worked and a night differential. Metrovías, the private corporation that manages the rail system, claims those benefits have already been granted. Metrovías representative Lucila Maldonado warned the strikers they would be disciplined for violating the government order.

### Argentine communications workers end strike

Argentine communications workers returned to work last week after obtaining a 20 percent rise. The raise was short of their demand of 25 percent but above management's 3 percent offer.

The strike began on November 29 and involved the occupation of telephone facilities in Buenos Aires, Rosario and Mendoza. Mass picketing prevented management from evicting workers from corporate offices in downtown Buenos Aires. The communications union had also refused a Labor Ministry order for obligatory conciliation, which in Argentina prevents workers from striking for a mandated period while negotiations continue.

### United States

### Illinois workers strike agricultural implement company

More than 200 workers at McLaughlin Body Works in East Moline, Illinois, walked out on strike December 6 after voting the previous night to reject attempts by the company to alter insurance and retirement language in their contract. It was the second no-vote by members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) following an earlier contract rejection in November.

Workers are also demanding a better insurance policy and increased pensions. The company has responded by hiring strikebreakers and resuming production. McLaughlin Body Works supplies cabs for both John Deere and Case agricultural machinery.

#### **Workers strike Ohio newspaper**

Some 170 reporters, copy editors, advertising department workers and delivery workers struck the *Vindicator* newspaper of Youngstown, Ohio, December 9, after turning down management's last offer by a three-to-one margin. The workers, members of Local 34011 of the Newspaper Guild, rejected a three-year contract offering raises of 1 percent in the first two years and 2 percent in the last year.

Workers have endured a long period of concessions and want bigger raises and improvements in health care. The owners have hired out-of-state workers from other newspapers to continue production of the daily that serves 70,000 readers.

#### **New Jersey electrical workers walk out**

About 1,350 electrical workers, mostly lineman, technicians, and clerks, went on strike December 8 against the Jersey Central Power and Light Company (JCP&L). The major issue in the dispute involves the skyrocketing costs of health benefits.

The previous contract expired Oct. 31, but was extended twice in an attempt to reach a settlement and avoid a walkout. Management personnel are attempting to fill the jobs of the striking workers in order to accomplish emergency and other high-priority tasks.

When negotiations began in September, the company offered the workers a 9 percent wage increase over three years. At the same time, they are demanding that workers pay more for their health care costs, which have increased from \$7 million annually in 2002 to about \$14 million this year. According to press reports, the union leadership of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), that is representing the strikers, is willing to pay more for health care costs for active employees, but is having difficulty accepting company demands that retirees increase their financial contributions for their health benefits.

JCP&L is the state's second-largest utility and provides electricity to 1 million customers in 13 counties, primarily in the northern part of the state. The last time the company had a strike was in 1987.

#### **Pennsylvania school employees ratify agreement, end strike**

Members of the Hempfield Area Education Support Personnel Association in Pennsylvania ended their five-day strike after agreeing to a mediated contract. The 240 bus drivers, custodians, food service workers and other school employees walked out when the school board withdrew its

earlier offer and attempted to substitute lower wage increases and higher health insurance costs.

The new agreement restored the previous amounts and also reduced the gap in a two-tier pay scale. The old agreement's two tiers paid some workers as much as \$4.50 an hour less for performing the same work. Under the new agreement, workers at the low end of the pay spectrum will see their wages increased from \$10.75 to \$12.25. Upper-tier workers will see their pay hiked from \$14.76 to \$15.95 and rise to \$17.95 by the end of the five-year agreement.

#### **Canada**

##### **Postal workers on strike**

On December 9, about 2,500 Canada Post employees in Fredericton, New Brunswick and Antigonish, Nova Scotia, began rotating strike action. The workers, members of Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Union of Postal Communications Employees (UPCE), voted in favor of a strike action last November.

The main issue in the dispute is an effort by management, which represents the federal government, to impose contract terms far below those in collective agreements reached by other Canada Post employees. In addition, government negotiators have proposed a rollback on health benefits, severance pay, and various leave provisions. Wage increases offered from 2.25 percent to 2.4 percent a year in a four-year contract fall well short of those for other employees of Canada Post, who have already negotiated a 3 percent yearly increase.

##### **British Columbia college workers set to strike**

Support staff employed at eight campuses of Northern Lights College spread across the northeastern part of British Columbia voted December 6 in favor of strike action by an overwhelming majority of 90 percent. Talks between the college and the union representing 130 support staff represented by BC Government and Service Employees' Union broke down November 26 because of an effective wage freeze imposed by the provincial Liberal government on public-sector workers.

The workers have had no wage increase in five of the last seven years and have seen their real income fall as a result of inflation. The union's demands include a pay raise of 7 percent in the next four years and benefits equal to those of college instructors. If further discussions fail to bring a deal, the union has threatened a strike at the start of the new year.

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