

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Latin America

Mexican government sets new minimum wage below poverty level

The Mexican government of Vicente Fox has set the country's new minimum wage at four dollars a day for 2005, the cost of two tubes of toothpaste. Statistics from the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) reveal that almost a million workers in the formal sector earn the minimum wage, despite claims that the wage is "merely a reference point" and that "almost no one" is paid this little.

Almost half of the 43.3 million people who make up the country's economically active population work in the informal sector, where their income is often even less than the minimum wage, while around 3.6 percent are officially unemployed. Studies conducted by the National Minimum Wage Commission, made up of government, business and union representatives, acknowledge that the official minimum wage has decreased by 72.9 percent in terms of buying power since 1988.

Of Mexico's slightly more than 100 million people, around half live in poverty. During 2004, some 400,000 new jobs were created in Mexico, but this fell far short of the 1.3 million jobs needed to provide full employment. According to economist Enrique Quintana, the deficit was covered by the 400,000 workers who emigrated to the United States and the 500,000 who joined the informal sector of the economy.

One-day strike at private water company in Argentina

Argentina's sanitation union staged a partial work stoppage at the French and Argentine-controlled water company Aguas Argentinas December 15 over a wage increase. The union cancelled plans for a full strike

after the Ministry of Labor worked out an agreement.

The protest at Aguas Argentinas comes amid salary hike demands from other unions in recent weeks. Foetra, the telephone workers group, secured last week a 20 percent pay increase from Telefonica de Argentina and Telecom Argentina after a weeklong strike in which employees occupied the companies' key operational centers. Meanwhile, Buenos Aires city subway workers and Buenos Aires province teachers are also locked in ongoing negotiations and periodic protests with their respective employers.

United States

St. Louis hospital strike continues

Nurses are continuing their strike against St. John's Mercy Medical Center in St. Louis. The strike, which began December 15, is over wages, benefits, a requirement that nurses not in the union pay a fee for union representation and a greater say for nurses in providing patient care.

The hospital has offered nurses a 3 percent pay raise in each year of a three-year contract. It wants to retain the right to change benefits during the contract. St. John's also wants an open shop that allows nonunion nurses to opt out of the fee.

More than 100 members of the area's skilled trades unions took on picketing duties Saturday at St. John's Mercy Medical Center to give striking nurses time to spend with their families on Christmas.

San Francisco hotel workers protest

Hundreds of hotel employees, working without a contract, protested at Union Square in San Francisco December 21. The rally came a month after the owners at 14 top city hotels agreed to a 60-day "cooling-off period" during which they promised not to lock out hotel workers and the union vowed not to strike. The agreement followed a six-week lockout that kept some 4,300 workers from their jobs. With a month remaining before the cooling-off period is over, hotel owners say the union needs to make concessions.

New York comedy club performers threaten to strike

Performers in New York are threatening to strike if the city's comedy clubs do not give them a pay rise. More than 300 performers have formed the New York Comedians Coalition to campaign for better money. They say rates of \$75 for weekend sets and as low as \$15 for 20-minute weekday sets leave them well out of reach of the cost of living in the city.

"We've been making the same wage since 1985," said comedian Ted Alexandro, who added that drinks and admission prices had soared over the past 20 years. "A comic working 12 to 14 shows a week grosses barely over \$20,000 from the New York clubs," he said.

Canada

No progress in strike by Quebec liquor workers

Efforts by management and union negotiators to end the strike by Quebec Liquor Corporation (Société des Alcools du Québec) workers failed when negotiations, which are being mediated by former Quebec premier Lucien Bouchard, broke off December 19. The key issues in the strike are scheduling and job security for part-time workers. The liquor corporation rejected the union offer to put all issues to arbitration.

The 3,800 workers, who have been without a contract for two years, went on strike November 19. During the strike managers have taken the jobs of strikers at some outlets and have kept open 50 stores out of about 450 across the province. Workers are represented by Syndicat des employé(e)s de magasins et de bureaux de la SAQ (SEMB SAQ).

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