

The Americas

19 January 1999

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NABET caves in to ABC-TV

The union representing production and technical workers locked out of work by ABC television for more than two months has capitulated to the network's conditions for a return to work. The National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians, or NABET, approved ABC-TV's back-to-work agreement January 15, and ordered its members to stop picketing and return to their jobs within 72 hours.

NABET's 2,400 members at ABC, including hundreds of news producers and other behind-the-scenes workers in New York City, Washington DC, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles, have been working without a contract since March 31, 1997. After NABET's five locals staged a one-day walkout last November 2, the network, owned by the Walt Disney Company, locked its members out. On December 11 the network submitted what it called its "final" contract offer to the union, including sweeping concessions in healthcare benefits.

ABC negotiators insisted in November that the union agree to give the network at least 72 hours' notice of any job action likely to affect a broadcast, and 14 days' notice of a job action affecting a remote broadcast such as a football game. After weeks of rebuffing those terms, NABET agreed to them last week, union officials said. The union has reportedly indicated its willingness to accept the company's enforcement provisions, which would provide for damages in cases of illicit walkouts and for arbitration of any violations within 24 hours.

As part of the back-to-work deal NABET leaders agreed to submit, in no later than two weeks, the company's final proposal for a ratification vote by its members.

Kaiser Aluminum locks out striking workers

Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corp. responded to a union offer to return to work at five aluminum plants by locking out 3,100 members of the United Steelworkers of America.

The union's climbdown came after a three and a half month strike provoked by Kaiser's decision to slash the work

force by 15 percent. Once the strike began the company raised the target for job reduction to 20 to 30 percent. The struggle involves workers at three plants in Washington state, as well as one in Gramercy, Louisiana and one in Newark, Ohio. Workers were demanding wage and pension parity with workers at other companies such as Alcoa and Reynolds.

The USWA responded by announcing a toothless publicity campaign, including filing additional unfair labor practice charges, holding protests at shareholder meetings, and conducting a union-sponsored environmental and safety audit.

MSI workers approve contract, gain union recognition

Workers at Magnetic Specialties Inc. in Marietta, Ohio approved their first union contract after a 22-month strike to win union recognition under the United Steelworkers of America. Employees approved the three-year contract by a 52-2 margin.

According to the USWA, the agreement provides minimum wage increases of \$1.30 an hour for all workers, company paid family health insurance, improved vacations, holidays, sick days, a retirement plan and a union shop. Sixteen fired employees are also guaranteed the right to return to their jobs.

Ford of Brazil victimizes workers protesting layoffs

The Brazilian unit of Ford Motor Co. ordered 500 workers at its Taubate plant in Sao Paulo to stay home indefinitely because of a protest at another Ford factory. Workers at Ford's key Sao Bernardo car assembly plant have been occupying factory floors to protest the sacking of 2,800 workers there shortly before Christmas.

A union leader at Taubate's Metal Workers Union said Ford has threatened to lay off half of the 500 workers in May. Ford said it could not confirm the prospects of layoffs at Taubate, which employs about 1,500 workers and manufactures motors and transmission systems.

Ford has been trying to cut its work force in Brazil because of slumping sales amid an industrywide recession. Brazil's Association of Auto manufacturers last week reported Ford's passenger car sales had fallen 33.8 percent to 144,815 units in 1998, outpacing a 23.6 percent decline posted by the industry.

Venezuela oil union petitions for strike

Venezuela's main oil union, Fedepetrol, announced it would submit a strike petition to the government to protest cuts in oil production and spending by the state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).

With oil prices at a 12-year low, the government has cut back production and slashed oil workers' jobs. The union argues that the PDVSA policy surrenders market share to Middle Eastern production.

At the beginning of January the Fedepetrol union affiliate in Zulia state launched a wildcat strike that received no support from the union bureaucracy. The Fedepetrol leadership opposed any action that would create a crisis at the beginning of the presidency of Hugo Chavez, who takes office in February. A strike petition requires 120 hours of negotiation before any work stoppage is legal.

Chiquita uses hurricane disaster as leverage against banana workers

Chiquita Brands International threatened January 13 to abandon banana production in Honduras unless the union representing workers signed a new labor agreement within 48 hours. The devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch wiped out production for the next year or more, endangering the jobs of 7,000 Chiquita workers.

Chiquita used the crisis to force the banana workers union, SITRATERCO, to sign a concessionary agreement last December 1. Additional points were to be settled later, which included increasing workloads, further reductions in benefits such as sick days and the introduction of new technology. The new agreement is expected to result in severe job reductions.

In December Chiquita agreed to use idled union workers to rehabilitate the banana plantations. Instead they have found even cheaper labor available in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch to replace SITRATERCO members.

Striking meatpackers reject contract

The nearly 1,000 workers who have been on strike at Quality Meat Packers' Toronto and Bramalea plants since December 7 have rejected the company's latest contract offer by a majority of 57 percent. Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 743, the workers are resisting demands for drastic wage cuts, as well as rollbacks in benefits and job security. The rejected offer called for general laborers' wages to be reduced by more than \$6 per hour, from \$16.67 to \$10.40.

Family-owned Quality Meats operates only these two Ontario pork processing plants. It insists that without drastic wage cuts it will be unable to compete in an increasingly competitive and global meat market and has threatened, should its concessions demands not be met soon, to permanently close the strike-bound plants. Quality Meat's

main competitor, Maple Leaf Foods, forced its workers to accept wage cuts of \$6 an hour last year after provoking a strike at, and then closing, its Edmonton operations. Whereas Maple Leaf coupled its wage cut and other rollbacks with a \$20,000 signing bonus, Quality Meat is offering a signing bonus of just \$1,000.

The strike coincides with a deepening crisis for hog farmers. Wholesale pork prices have plunged by more than 67 percent in the last two months, largely because of the collapse of demand in East Asia and the former Soviet Union.

Workers protest paper mill closure in Quebec

Six hundred Abitibi-Consolidated workers and their supporters blocked the main highway in Quebec's Gaspé region January 12 to protest the impending closure of the paper giant's Chandler mill. The company has already reduced production at the two-machine mill to just one machine, throwing more than 200 workers onto the unemployment lines.

The Chandler mill was one of 12 Abitibi mills in Eastern Canada that was shut by a strike throughout last summer and for much of the fall. Members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) union, the Abitibi workers were seeking to resist the company's demands for the scrapping of a companywide collective agreement. Ultimately, the strike was lost with the union agreeing to a six-year contract and mill-by-mill negotiations on all contract clauses, those governing wages and pensions excepted.

The CEP has indicated it would be willing to make further concessions to convince Abitibi or another paper company and the Quebec government to invest the \$200 million reportedly required to modernize the mill. "The industry may think Gaspesia is already dead," says CEP vice-president Elmo Whitton, "but the government, company and workers know the bottomline.... A gap of \$60 million exists to ensure a decent return, and if it can't agree let's find a buyer."



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