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

American Airlines forced to cancel flights due to pilot protest

American Airlines was forced to cancel 214 flights February 7 due to what the airline is terming "pilot absences." The cancellations amounted to 9 percent of the company's 2,250 scheduled flights for the day and caused American to scramble to find seats for its passengers on other airlines.

The lack of pilots for flights is believed to be a protest by members of the Allied Pilots Association over a refusal by the airline's parent company, AMR Corp., to pay pilots at recently acquired Reno Air the same rates as those paid to American Airlines pilots.

Pilots are barred by law from striking over the contract deadlock, but pilots are free to refuse overtime, which can force cancellation of flights. On February 6, the previous day, American Airlines was forced to cancel 90 flights due to the same problem.

FedEx pilots approve contract

Pilots at Federal Express Corp. voted by 2,516 to 395 to approve a five-year contract after two and a half years of negotiations by the company and the FedEx Pilots Association.

The 3,600 pilots obtained a 17 percent raise (below the 24 percent sought by the union), a 31.5 percent increase in pension payments and a joint labor-management committee to deal with flight schedules and complaints. A union official declared the agreement was "a complete change in philosophy that allows us to get in and work with the company to provide the rules that are going to make our lives tolerable for the remainder of our careers."

Federal Express pilots were originally represented by the Airline Pilots Association and twice rejected contracts endorsed by that union. In 1996 the FedEx Pilots Association moved in to displace ALPA. Last October the union threatened a strike but backed down when FedEx founder and chairman Frederick Smith threatened pilots with the loss of their jobs and contracted other airlines to help break a strike.

Titan Tire reports losses as union and company meet

Tire manufacturer Titan International announced February 3 that it anticipates 1998 earnings will fall to 39 cents per share from the $1.10 earned the previous year, due to a 10-month strike by the United Steelworkers (USWA). The announcement came as company officials and the USWA held a meeting initiated by the union aimed at restarting talks.

The strike was launched against Titan plants in Des Moines, Iowa and Natchez, Mississippi. Presently the Des Moines plant is operating at about 70 percent capacity, while the Natchez plant is approaching its pre-strike capacity with the company planning on increasing production for 1999.

Kaiser to restart strikebound plant

Kaiser Aluminum Corp. announced plans to restart 50,000 tons of aluminum smelter capacity at its Mead, Washington plant. The plant is one of five Kaiser plants currently being struck by the United Steelworkers.

Kaiser set aside plans to restart 20,000 tons of smelting capacity at its Tacoma, Washington plant due to low market demand. The strike began last September 30 after Kaiser called for the destruction of 400 union jobs. Since that time the company has raised the demand for a workforce reduction to between 600 and 900 jobs.

Judge throws out Nike sweatshop suit

California Superior Court Judge David Garcia dismissed a lawsuit which charged Nike Inc. violated California's false advertising laws by concealing sweatshop conditions in its Asian factories from California consumers by advertising it guarantees a "living wage" to its 450,000 workers.

The lawsuit used studies by labor and human rights groups, media investigations and a Nike-commissioned audit by the firm of Ernst & Young to back its charges. In Indonesia, a study released October 1998 found that "minimum physical requirements" per month came to $33.25 to sustain a male worker and $35.00 for a female worker. The monthly base wage for Nike shoe workers was $20 at that time, and since then has only been raised to $25. Indonesian Nike workers had made $2.46 a day before the Asian economic crisis hit. Now they earn less than $1 a day. Philip Knight, Nike chairman and CEO, owns 100 million shares of Nike stock, representing a value of $293 million.

The February 5 decision to throw the case out of court was given with no explanation. It comes at a time when Nike Vice President Joseph Ha was cited for sending a letter to the president of the state-run Vietnam General Confederation of Labor warning that human rights organizations critical of Nike were aiming to "create a so-called 'democratic' society" in Vietnam, where Nike's sports shoe manufacturing has become Vietnam's largest employer. Previous to Ha's letter a series of strikes had hit Nike's factories. In the aftermath, the head of the Ho Chi Minh City Confederation of Labor, who served as an aggressive monitor for human rights organizations, was removed from his position.

Nike's empire is synonymous with sweatshop labor. In President Clinton's first term the company lobbied hard with positive results to get US trade policy with China to be separated from any human rights policy which might restrict its ability to carry out super-exploitation.

Detroit typographical union reaches agreement with newspapers

International Typographical Union Local 18 reached an agreement Friday with the Detroit Newspapers, the business agency for the*Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*, which has conducted a three-year union-busting campaign against 2,000 workers who went on strike July 13, 1995. The ITU is the first of six unions to settle. Its 130 members will vote on the deal February 14.

More than 2,000 workers initially walked out in a dispute involving pay, manning levels and other issues. The Detroit newspapers, owned by publishing giants Knight-Ridder and Gannett, continued operating with scab labor, and with the backing of city and local officials and police smashed the strike. Two years ago the unions made an unconditional back-to-work offer, accepting the elimination of hundreds of strikers' jobs.

Ford suspends layoff of 2,800 Brazilian autoworkers

Following a 50-day occupation of its plant in Sao Bernardo do Campos, near Sao Paulo, Ford agreed February 3 to temporarily suspend the layoff of 2,800 workers. The decision followed lengthy negotiations with Luiz Marinho, leader of *Sindicato dos Metalurgicos do ABC.* Brazilian President Cardoso was also involved in the negotiations.

In return for ending the occupation, Ford agreed to rescind the layoffs.

Instead it will begin a program of voluntary resignations (PVD: Programa de Demissoes Voluntarias). The program is open to all the 6,500 auto workers at the plant until February 12. On February 18, Ford and the union will meet to assess the result of the program. Marinho has said that the union accepts that there is a surplus of 1,200 workers at the plant.

Marinho is counting on the approval of an emergency deal for the industry, presented two weeks ago by President Cardoso, which would reduce taxes on new cars to stimulate their sale. Marinho expects the increase in sales to be strong enough to make the layoffs unnecessary. Meanwhile, those that accept the voluntary resignation will receive 41.5 percent of their monthly wage for every year worked, and medical benefits until April, or the value of those services (about US$45).

The workers approved the agreement, which also obligates Ford to pay workers their wages during the 48 days that the plant was shut down. Also present at that meeting was the president of the PT (Workers Party), Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva. During the 48 days in which workers occupied the plant, Ford lost the production of 3,300 cars.

In a separate agreement, Ford also delayed until February 23 the layoff of 702 workers from its Ipiranga truck plant, also near Sao Paulo. It will initiate another PDV plan at that plant. Workers at the truck plant have had their hours cut from 42 to 38 per week. Paulinho, the ABC local president at the Ipiranga plant, expects that about 200 workers will accept the voluntary resignation. He thinks that the second phase of negotiations will result in a reduced workweek for the auto workers.

The union leaders have based their deal on hopes that the government stimulation will spark an increase in car sales. That optimism has no basis in fact. The crisis of the *real* is expected to force a reduction in Gross Domestic Product by 7 percent in 1999. The Ipiranga plant, which was producing 180 trucks per day in 1998, is down to 130 trucks per day. General Motors has announced the layoff of 1,000 workers at its Sao Cayetano do Sul plant, on top of the 1,500 that were laid off in 1998.

Auto layoffs in Argentina

Twelve hundred auto workers were laid off indefinitely by Renault in Buenos Aires as a result of a collapse in auto sales. Compared to December, Argentine auto production fell by 45.4 percent in January. Sales dropped by 20.2 percent and exports by 27.9 percent due to the Brazilian crisis. The domestic market is not doing well either. In December production fell by 31 percent.

The measure taken by Renault is the latest in a wave of sackings as a result of the Brazil crisis. Ford suspended 1,450 workers for 15 months. Fiat has 2,800 workers on layoff. Volkswagen imposed a four-day workweek and Sevel suspended 1,600 workers. In addition to the layoffs, Renault initiated a plan of voluntary retirement for many of its workers.

Mass protests in Ecuador

The government declared a national holiday in Ecuador on February 4 in response to the inevitable shutdown of the country by mass protests against the economic policies of the government of Jamil Mahuad. Unions and student groups are demanding that a 400 percent increase in prices of fuel and electricity be rescinded, together with a check cashing tax. Protesters are also demanding an end to police repression against the protesters.

Teachers struck February 4 in solidarity with the protests. The National Educators Union initiated the indefinite strike because President Mahuad has refused to allow wage increases that were agreed to by the previous government.

The strike began as part of the day of protest organized by the Popular Front, an organization of workers and students. The day of protest commemorates the second anniversary of the fall of President Abdala Bucaram, who was removed by Congress in 1997 for "mental incapacity" following a general strike and mass protests. Teachers' and state workers' wages were frozen as part of measures to combat inflation, which is raging at an annual rate of 40 percent.

Unemployed Argentines demand bread and work

On February 1 more than 1,000 unemployed workers gathered in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo square across the street from the "Rose House," Argentina's White House. Ten representatives of the marchers presented a petition to President Menem.

The petition stated in part: "Mr. President, we are not delinquents. We are unemployed workers that are hungry." The petition demanded that the government create 5,000 jobs and give free food to the poor.

The demonstrators then marched to the Labor Ministry, located near the docks, beating drums and chanting demands for "bread and work." The Menem government, claiming that supermarkets would by taken over by the workers, used a heavy police presence from early that morning to prevent the marchers from rallying in front of supermarkets.

The original plan of the organizers, the "Class Struggle Current" and the "Independent Movement of Retired Workers," was to demonstrate in front of supermarkets. Their demand is that each market donate 50,000 kilograms of food to the poor every month.

The government denounced the Class Struggle leader, Carlos Santillan. "He will not be allowed to mobilize people," said the Security Secretary, Miguel Angel Tomas. Tomas also announced that charges are being brought against Santillan and Raul Castells, leader of the Retired Workers. Castells is already under arrest for "inciting the taking of private property."

The chamber of supermarket owners had been pressing the government to act against the protesters. The increasing number of poor demanding food from the markets is making them very nervous.

Santillan emphatically declared that his group "never intended to take over supermarkets.... We never said that this day of bread and work would end with the takeover of supermarkets."

Ultimatum to Mexican copper miners

Striking miners at the Cananea mine in Northern Mexico were threatened February 3 with the loss of their jobs unless they go back to work within two weeks. The miners are standing firm against the government, the mine bosses and their own national union. The majority of the 1,500 miners voted to continue their 11-week-old strike.

A week before, the company (*Mexicana de Cananea*) broke off talks in Mexico City, demanding that miners first return to work as a condition for further bargaining.

The striking miners are demanding that *Mexicana* rescind the layoff of 600 miners and the sacking of 198 local union members, for strike related activity. "We have no alternative other than continuing the strike," said Alejandro Mange Ruiz, who heads the local at Cananea. *Mexicana de Cananea* accused the 198 workers of acts of vandalism and threats.

The Cananea mine, just south of the Arizona border, is the second largest copper mine in Mexico. Members of the local union have been meeting with Sonora government officials in an attempt to resolve the issue.

Teachers strikes in Surinam and Bolivia

Schools were closed February 1 by a teachers strike in Surinam. The teachers have declared that they will stay out until the government grants them a wage increase. The government had offered cost-of-living bonuses every three months, which was rejected by the teachers union. The Surinamese currency has lost 50 percent of its value in the last year with respect to the dollar. This has resulted in a drop in living conditions for the majority of the population.

In Bolivia 80,000 teachers and school workers struck February 1, the first day of school. The government of Hugo Banzer has decreed that all workers will be fired if they strike for more than six days. The government plans to replace the teachers with retired teachers and university employees.

A leader of the strikers, Javier Baldivieso, denounced the government for trying to go back to the days of the dictatorship and using "the club to conduct public education."

Hugo Banzer was the Bolivian military dictator between 1971 and 1978.

Bell Canada operators threaten to strike

Ten thousand operators and technicians of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union at Bell Canada are expected to go on strike by the end of the month. This follows the announcement two weeks ago that Bell will sell off most of its interest in call centers in Canada, putting 2,400 operators out of work.

The proposed strike action is aimed at preventing the sale of Bell's operator service to Arizona-based Excell Global Services, which is to scheduled to go through in March. As well as mass layoffs, the deal will mean wage reductions of up to 40 percent for the mostly female work force that would remain.

Both sides in the negotiations, which are said to be very far apart, have asked to be released from conciliation talks enforced by the federal government in order that a lockout or a strike could proceed.

Dofasco Steel fined for death of two workers

The giant steel company Dofasco of Hamilton, Ontario was fined $400,000 last month for the deaths of two of its workers. The decision was part of $675,000 in fines for three violations of the Occupational Health and Safety Act in separate incidents in 1997, resulting in the deaths as well as injury to several others.