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

Resignations in Ontario teachers disputes

In the ongoing disputes between teachers and school boards in Ontario, 95 teachers at one Catholic school board in the Toronto area have decided to resign rather than work under conditions enforced by a recent arbitration decision. The arbitration process, which had been widely criticized, was imposed when Catholic teachers were forced back to work after lock-outs and strike actions last fall arising from cuts to school funding by the provincial Tory government.

The changes have meant increases in the number of classes for teachers as well as cuts in preparation time. Many of the school boards in the province have faced similar rulings and have responded with work-to-rule campaigns and protests. The straitjacket in which teachers now find themselves is a result of the sell-out of the massive strike action over a year ago, which gave the Tories a free hand to cut education funding.

Federal government workers blockade highway

About 500 workers of the Public Service Alliance of Canada blocked a major highway near Montreal's Dorval airport last Friday in protest over the latest government contract offer. The blockade lasted several hours, until riot police were called in to clear the way.

Last Tuesday workers from the same union staged a sit-down strike at a major downtown office building in Montreal in protest over similar issues. These protests come amidst contract negotiations affecting workers across the country, which have led to rotating strikes by the PSAC in various regions over the past weeks. The workers have not seen a wage increase since 1991, and the government is offering a mere 1 percent in the new contract.

Bell operators union challenges sell-off

The union representing 10,000 operators and technicians of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union at Bell Canada have challenged the legality of the sell-off of its operator division, which will cost over 2,400 jobs. In a filing to the Canada Industrial Relations board last Thursday, the union appeal seeks to prevent the sale of this division to an American company that, in addition to the job cuts, will cut wages by as much as 40 percent. This move follows the strike vote last week that may put workers on the picket line by the end of the month.

Steelworkers strike Asarco's Montana lead smelter

Union workers struck Asarco Corporation's East Helena, Montana lead smelter February 8 after twice rejecting separate tentative agreements between the United Steelworkers and company management.

According to company officials, the last tentative agreement proposed minimal benefit increases combined with demands for workrule changes and the layoff of 20 workers out of the 208-member work force. "We must improve our plant's financial performance," said the plant's manager, John Shaw. Asarco plans on restarting production by running the plant with salaried personnel.

Healthcare union targets Connecticut nursing facilities for strike action

Two Connecticut nursing facilities were served 10-day strike notices February 10 by the District 1199 NE/Service Employees International Union, which has given a target strike date of February 24.

The skilled nursing facilities, located in New Haven and Norwalk, are operated by Genesis ElderCare and comprise just two of fifty nursing unit locations around the state that could by hit by strike action. Both Genesis and the SEIU are lobbying the Connecticut legislature to increase the Medicaid reimbursement rate to nursing facilities. Union contracts with Genesis expired last fall and negotiations have failed to produce an acceptable agreement.

Genesis ElderCare, which owns 86 skilled nursing and assisted living centers throughout New England, has threatened it will draft workers from its other facilities to replace the 287 workers slated to strike.

America West flight attendants reject arbitration

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) rejected a call by the National Mediation Board for binding arbitration, placing the four-year negotiation dispute with America West Airlines into a 30-day cooling-off period, which could be followed by strike action. If an agreement is not reached, the AFA has indicated it will not call a company-wide strike but instead will engage in random walkouts against selected flights.

America West's 2,100 flight attendants are demanding pay scales based on an average of the top 10 airlines, which would result in a boost from the present annual salary of $21,972 to $32,724. Attendants also want the same per diem or daily expense allowance of $1.80 per hour received by pilots. Presently attendants receive no per diem.

The gap on economic issues between union and management is estimated to total $16.5 million. America West pulled in a record $108.6 million in profits last year and $75 million the year before. The company is rumored to be holding merger talks with both United Airlines and Delta.

Thousands of teachers fired in Bolivia

The Bolivian government made good on its threats of earlier in the week and began temporarily firing striking teachers. They are

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to be replaced with retired teachers. Confrontations are taking place at school sites as substitutes attempt to enter. At least one union leader, Vilma Plata, has been arrested.

The teachers have been on strike since February 5. The Federation of Urban Teachers, representing 60,000 teachers, began the strike. The Federation of Rural Teachers, numbering 35,000 teachers, also joined the action. They are demanding increases exceeding the 6 percent that the government has ordered. Teachers are demanding that recent government decrees be rescinded that force teachers to stay in one school the entire year, that permit parents to monitor their performance and that set penalties against those who do not perform according to government standards. The government of Hugo Banzer is enforcing a decree that allows the state to fire any public servant absent for more than six days.

The government plans to suspend the striking teachers for a year. Education Minister Tito Hoz de Vila declared: "This is war to the finish, it's either them or the good teachers. It's over." In reply to the state-organized strikebreaking, the teachers union declared that the strike would last indefinitely. Meanwhile in Cochabamba, 850 kilometers southeast of La Paz, strikers fought with replacement teachers.

Teachers strike in Ecuador

After being on strike for a week, Ecuadorian teachers are being threatened with firings. The teachers are demanding that the government carry out pay increases granted by the previous regime. President Jamil Mahuad has refused to grant the increase. He insists that the increase would cost $160 million and that the state is in no condition to pay.

The government is using a law that allows it to terminate teachers who are absent for more than three consecutive days. It is threatening to fire 210 teachers a day, out of a total of 130,000. Teachers in Ecuador average $100 a month, while the cost of basic necessities is calculated at $250 a month.

Since he assumed the office of president six months ago, Mahuad has imposed a draconian austerity plan. These measures have included a 300 to 4,000 percent increase in utility costs and the freezing of wages. Union, student and rural organizations opposing the austerity plans have conducted two one-day general strikes in recent weeks.

Teacher and healthcare strikes paralyze Dominican Republic

Forty thousand teachers have gone on strike in the Dominican Republic, shutting down all 52,000 of the nation's schools. The teachers are demanding incentive pay promised by the government two years ago. Their protest has coincided with a healthcare action in the northeast region of the island. Doctors are demanding increased funding for hospitals and clinics in addition to raises for physicians and health workers. The doctors have announced they will conduct a partial three-day strike February 17.

On February 10, police killed two protesters in the City of San Francisco de Macoris at a rally against poor living conditions. Several other protesters were injured. In San Francisco de Macoris the streets are in disrepair, and there are frequent interruptions in water and electric service.

Protests rock El Salvador

Public employees in El Salvador are demanding job security and back pay and peasants are demanding a moratorium on their debts. They have launched a series of protests in the streets of San Salvador. On February 10, 5,000 peasants marched to the legislature. President Armando Calderon rejected their demands, claiming that they would hinder the reactivation of agriculture following the damage done by Hurricane Mitch.

On the same day, health workers launched a 24-hour strike demanding back pay and benefits. The strike affected public hospitals and health centers. The government called the strike an "unjust act" affecting the patients. There is presently a cholera alert in El Salvador.

On the same day, dozens of employees of the telecommunications company, privatized in 1998, protested against the elimination of 1,000 jobs.

University strike in Mexico

A strike at the *Universidad Interamericana* in Mexico City has left 12,000 students without classes since February 1. *Interamericana* is one of the most exclusive universities in Mexico, established by the Jesuits in 1943. The union that represents 850 of *Interamericana's* 1,152 employees is demanding a 22 percent raise, comparable to Mexico's inflation rate.

The conflict has developed into a dispute over "reform and modernization." The administration wants to privatize university services and change the manner in which professors are hired and fired. Enrique Beacoechea, the university's director, refuses to negotiate until the union accepts those "reforms," threatening closure of the university.

While the *Universidad Interamericana* serves Mexico's elite, the UNAM (National Metropolitan Autonomous University) has been charging only 20 centavos (2 US cents) a semester since 1948. However, UNAM is now proposing to raise that fee for new students to US$100 per semester, which would make it next to impossible for poor students to attend university.

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