

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

Strike at CBC cripples broadcasts

A strike by 2,000 technicians and designers at the state-run Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was called last week, affecting radio and television broadcasts for the programming network across Canada. Striking workers of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union have been without a contract since last June and are fighting for a wage increase and job security. The strike, which was called over stalled contract negotiations, has so far only forced programming to be pared down across the country, with the exception of Quebec and Moncton, New Brunswick, where workers are represented by a different union.

Members of the Canadian Media Guild, representing 3,300 CBC producers and journalists, refused to cross picket lines for one day last week in support of the strike, prompting a court ruling declaring their action illegal. In addition court injunctions have prohibited picketing outside the new Air Canada Center sports arena in downtown Toronto, which opened last weekend. A threat by Teamsters to honor the picket lines at the center was circumvented by the court action.

The strike was provoked when CBC revoked their final offer immediately prior to the strike deadline, insisting on no wage increase for the three-year contract. The union, which originally asked for a 30 percent wage increase to bring workers up to industry parity, is now asking for only 5 percent, as well as guarantees that no more jobs will be lost over the next three years. The CBC, which is by far the largest noncommercial broadcaster in the country, has been crippled in recent years by vast budget and job cuts by the federal government. No new contract talks are currently scheduled.

Government to siphon billions from pension fund

A proposed overhaul of the public service pension plan will hand \$28 billion in newly defined "surplus" pension funds back to the federal Liberal government and force 340,000 civil servants to pay higher premiums. The proposed legislation, which was introduced last week, will also see the pensions of future workers invested in the volatile financial markets, effectively gambling with their retirement income.

The government has already used questionable accounting methods to take back about \$10 billion in pension funds in recent years including \$5 billion last year. The two largest

unions affected, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Professional Institute of the Public Service, have threatened to appeal to the courts if the law goes through.

Early vote tally indicates Northwest workers accept contract

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 143 announced that a preliminary tally of votes by 18,000 ground workers at Northwest Airlines will result in the passage of a new contract. Official verification will be announced next week.

The contract calls for a 14 percent raise, a 3.5 percent lump sum payment and a 50 percent increase in pensions. It is essentially the same agreement rejected overwhelmingly by Northwest workers last summer. There are reportedly some concessions made by the company on work rules and an agreement to include workers hired since 1996 under a job protection clause. But the agreement also allows the hiring of more part-time workers. In addition, small stations away from Northwest's main hubs will see the replacement of retiring workers by lower-paid nonunion workers.

The attempt to push through a contract last summer--widely regarded as a sellout by workers after going without a wage increase since the early 1990s--resulted in a rebellion against the IAM bureaucracy and the breakaway of 10,000 mechanics and cleaners to a rival craft union, the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association. AMFA and Northwest have yet to begin negotiations.

It is rumored that 60 percent of ramp service workers and 70 to 75 percent of ticket agents, reservationists and clerical workers voted for the new contract. At ratification meetings the IAM threatened workers that a rejection of the contract would lead to another year of negotiations before a new contract could be reached.

In separate negotiations the IAM reached agreement with Northwest on a contract covering 60 flight simulator technicians and support specialists at the company's NATCO pilot training facility in the Twin Cities. Neither the company nor the union revealed details of the agreement.

Northwest continues to negotiate with 11,000 flight attendants represented by the Teamsters union. On Saturday nine flight attendants attempted to deliver petitions signed by 8,000 union members to company negotiators during a bargaining session. Northwest representatives refused to accept the petitions, which vowed to "fight for a fair contract."

Negotiators have yet to resolve pay, pension or job protection issues. Flight attendants are also demanding health coverage for domestic partners of gay and lesbian workers.

RMI to resume strikebreaking operation at Ohio plant

RMI Titanium Corporation announced February 19 that it will soon begin to replace striking members of the United Steelworkers union after the lifting of a weeklong court order.

A Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas judge had imposed a one-week "cooling off" period after violence flared at the company's Niles, Ohio plant where 500 members of the USW have been on strike since October 1. The order limited the number of production workers that RMI could use in running its operations. It also served to reduce the number of strikers allowed to picket the plant.

Bus drivers strike Minnesota school district

Negotiators for 34 striking school bus drivers and the Thief River Falls school district in northwestern Minnesota met over the weekend to consider new terms.

The strikers, represented by the Minnesota School Employees Association, struck February 17 to demand an 8 percent increase, which would fall in line with raises received by other employee units of the district. Drivers are predominantly part-time and earn an average \$8,000 per year. The strike affects some 1,400 students who attend school in the Thief River Falls district.

NLRB rules against Titan Tire unfair labor practices

The National Labor Relations Board handed down a decision charging Titan Tire with violating certain NLRB provisions in an unfair labor practices strike by 650 members of the United Steelworkers union.

Administrative Law Judge Jerry M. Hermele in Washington DC found that Titan had illegally discontinued insurance benefits to workers who were on leave when the strike began, failed to provide the union with necessary bargaining information, moved equipment and jobs from Des Moines, hired replacement workers and unilaterally imposed a contract on members of USW Local 164.

The Steelworkers union has hailed the decision as a victory. But it comes in the tenth month of a long and bitter strike at Titan's plants in Des Moines, Iowa and Natchez, Mississippi. Titan must restore insurance benefits for the affected workers, restore production levels at the Des Moines plant, provide the union with certain bargaining information and revoke the imposition of its final offer. But reinstatement of striking workers will come only with a contract settlement. Titan claims that both plants are operating at over 70 percent capacity.

Bolivian teachers end their strike

Teachers unions have suspended their 20-day-old strike against the government and were due to return to work Monday, February 22. Javier Baldevieso, executive secretary of the Union of Urban Teachers of Bolivia, declared that the suspension of the strike was part of a strategy of reorganizing the labor movement "in the face of the government campaign."

He said that the union would not abandon demands for a wage increase beyond the 6 percent authorized by the government.

The government had begun suspending striking teachers for a year and replacing them with high school and college students and retirees.

Mexican sugar workers block plants

Mexican sugar workers blocked 50 out of the 51 sugar plants in Mexico in an attempt to receive payment for their benefits. The job action began on February 16 and quickly spread throughout Mexico. Eight of the plants settled promptly, to reestablish the flow of sugar.

Many sugar firms have found themselves short on funds. While they have continued to pay workers' wages, their housing, education and other benefits are not being paid. Workers received an 18 percent wage increase earlier this month.

The Mexican sugar harvest is currently at its peak, with many plants operating around the clock, seven days a week. The Sugar Workers Union represents 18,000 workers.

Nicaraguan newspaper workers demand press freedom

About 100 reporters, members of the Nicaraguan Workers Union (UPN--Union de Periodistas de Nicaragua) protested in front of the House of Government against government preparations to repress the media. "We are telling the government that we are in the streets defending our freedom of expression and our right to live in peace in Nicaragua," said Juan Alberto Enriquez, UPN president.

The government is set to approve a law to control the media, arguing that reporters abuse their freedom and could incite a new civil war in the country. Enriquez pointed out that the government is already suing those reporters who have exposed government corruption. The government is suing two Sandinista radio stations, the daily *El Nuevo Diario*, and a television station.



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