

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## State workers strike in Colombia

State workers struck in Colombia February 25 to protest the government's social policies. The strike involved between 500,000 and 1 million workers. It included state oil company workers, teachers, health workers and court employees. Some 7 million students had no classes since teachers played a leading role in the walk-out. The government of President Andres Pastrana is attempting to take away teachers' contractual rights, including pension benefits.

Reports indicate that activities were all but paralyzed in the oil and health sectors. Prior to the strike the government declared it illegal. "It is a political stoppage, against the law," said Labor Minister Hernando Yepes Arcila. He threatened to fire the striking workers.

The strike was organized by the CUT (United Confederation of Workers) and by the Federation of State Workers (FTSE), in opposition to Pastrana's austerity measures. These involve privatization, elimination of state agencies, and the layoff of thousands. The strike ended with marches and rallies in the main cities of the country, including Bogota, Medellin, Barranquilla and Bucaramanga.

This was the second strike against Pastrana since he assumed power in August 1998. The first, involving 700,000 last October, continued for 21 days. The Colombian economy stagnated in 1998, with zero growth. Official unemployment is 15.7 percent.

## Six thousand Honduran peasants strike to demand land

Six thousands peasants ended a strike in Honduras February 24, but threatened to resume their protest if talks with the government do not produce results. The farmers had blocked main roads to press President Carlos Flores to give them land that has been kept unproductive by the large landlords. They suspended their demonstration when Flores agreed to talk to them. The Coordination Council of Honduran Farmer Organizations (COCH) organized the demonstrations. Francisco Ramos, leader of the group, announced that the farmers are remaining in a state of emergency to press for the government to follow through. The farmers ask that in view of the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch the government cancel the implementation of the Law of Agricultural Modernization. This law was passed last December to reverse the Agrarian Reform and to favor international agribusiness and the Honduran oligarchs. Under the new law 400,000 farmers could lose their land.

## Construction workers strike in Uruguay

Electrical workers struck February 22 in Montevideo when Ariel Gomez Acosta, a 23-year-old worker, was electrocuted. This was the sixth fatality in the construction trades since the beginning of the year, the fourth due to electrocution. On average, occupational accidents claim a life every five days. The rate of deaths has increased as the construction unions have ceded control over safety conditions at work sites.

## Venezuelan students riot against police killing

A protest by students became violent after police killed one of the demonstrators in the Venezuelan City of Cumana February 24. Students from the University Technology Institute at Cumana blocked a local road to protest delays in the construction of a cafeteria. The state police used

shotguns to disperse the demonstrators, wounding six and killing Angel Luis Castillo, a 21-year-old student.

The next day 3,000 students from the institute and other campuses burned down the State Government House and a police building before the National Guard occupied central Cumana. The rioting continued throughout Cumana into the evening. Cumana is a state capital, 180 miles east of Caracas.

## National strike fails in Bolivia

A national strike called by the COB (Bolivian Workers Federation) failed to attract mass support February 26. Other than some sanitation and municipal workers, most workers went to their jobs. Even the traditionally more militant sectors of the COB--agricultural workers, miners and road workers--failed to join the strike.

The Bolivian press describes this as a "national crisis of union labor." In the wake of the defeat of the three-week-long teachers strike last week, the COB had to suspend a national meeting of union leaders, due to lack of quorum. For some time private sector unions in Bolivia have abandoned strike action, organizing night protest marches instead.

This was to be the seventh national strike against Hugo Banzer's government. The strike had been called to demand that the government abandon draft legislation that would make it easier to lay off workers. The COB was also demanding a minimum family wage of \$900 a month. Currently the minimum wage in Bolivia is \$57 a month.

## US shirt company closes unionized factory in Guatemala

The Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees union in the US has accused Phillips-Van Heusen, the US's largest shirtmaker, of closing its only unionized factory in Guatemala to prevent other apparel workers in Central America from organizing. In 1997 after a six-year struggle 500 workers at the Guatemala City factory won a union contract that increased their wages and improved the quality of the water in the plant. It was the only unionized factory among the more than 200 export-oriented apparel factories in the country, which employ some 80,000 *maquiladora* workers.

## Autoworkers vote for strike at Kansas Ford plant

Ninety-eight percent of the 5,000 members of United Auto Workers Local 249 have authorized strike action to oppose job overloading at Ford Motor Company's Kansas City assembly plant.

The UAW says the company needs to hire additional workers to manufacturing the popular F-Series full-size pickup truck along with the Ford Contour and Mercury Mystique models. A Ford spokesperson said, however, "There's no reason to think that this is going to result in any kind of work stoppage."

If Local 249 fails to resolve the issue, the UAW International can intervene in the negotiations. If an agreement is not reached, a five-day strike notice can be issued. The current UAW national contract with Ford expires in September. The UAW, however, has boasted that its relations with Ford are the best in the auto industry and that there have been no recent strikes at the number two automaker, unlike at GM and Chrysler.

## Saturn workers vote out discredited local UAW leaders

Workers at General Motors' Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee voted last week to remove 12 of the 13 executive board members of United Auto Workers Local 1853 who are closely identified with labor-management

collaboration.

For years the UAW International leadership held up its separate agreement at Saturn as a model for the relationship it wished to establish throughout GM's empire. The agreement, signed in 1985 to enable GM to cut costs and challenge Japanese small car producers, included few job classifications and wages that were only 80 percent of what other UAW workers were paid at GM plants. The UAW promised workers that the difference would be made up by meeting productivity and quality goals. The agreement also promised greater job security.

Anger towards the local union leadership developed last year as sales of small cars stagnated. GM cut production at the plant and decided to build a new mid-sized Saturn at its Linden, New Jersey plant, rather than at Spring Hill. Last summer Saturn workers voted by a 96 percent margin to authorize a strike at the plant.

GM is now demanding work rule changes and the elimination of up to 1,000 of the plant's 7,000 jobs before it approves a \$350 million investment to build sports utility vehicles at the factory. GM wants the new vehicle built in 17 hours of labor, down from the 22 hours Saturn takes to build its current small car models. Because there is a no-layoff clause in the agreement, GM is considering worker buyouts, allowing Saturn workers to transfer back to other GM plants or making laid-off employees work in community service.

One of those ousted by the membership, Mike Bennett, an executive board member who negotiated the original agreement in 1985, said, "The partnership is a big question mark now." The incoming local leadership, which includes Spring Hill Mayor Ron Hankins, campaigned to do away with Saturn's "risk and reward system" which ties a portion of workers' paychecks to productivity at the plant. However, Cliff Golf, who was elected vice president, stated, "We have Saturn's best interest in mind. Yes, there will be some changes here, but the partnership will remain intact."

#### **Rhode Island nurses in one-day strike**

Over 1,000 nurses and other hospital employees working without a contract since November 30 carried out their second one-day strike February 27 at Women & Infants Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, to protest stalled contract talks. The hospital called in temporary workers but was still forced to cancel nonemergency surgery.

The New England Health Care Employees union called a previous one-day strike in December. Hospital management retaliated with a 29-day lockout. When nurses returned to work a one-year wage freeze and benefit concessions were imposed. The second and third year of the contract offered a miserly 2.4 percent. The union is seeking to overturn the imposed contract and negotiate a larger pay raise along with a job security clause.

Management is adamant about making the workers pay for a \$1.4 million operating loss in the current fiscal year. The deadlock has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many workers. "Before it was a family-oriented environment," Theresa Price said. "I don't know if it will go back to being that way with the management anymore."

#### **LA county home care workers unionize**

Los Angeles County health workers who provide care for the elderly and disabled in their homes voted 16,200 to 1,925 to join the Service Employees International Union. The total size of the new bargaining unit will number 74,000.

The workers presently serve 80,000 home care recipients and receive minimum wages paid out of local, state and federal funds. Union leaders and other healthcare specialists made the case for unionization on the basis that it would improve the quality of home care, thereby reducing the necessity for more expensive hospital care. The union will negotiate with a newly created county agency formed to oversee the industry.

**American Airlines and pilots union agree to mediation in event talks stall**

The Allied Pilots Association and American Airlines have agreed to mediation if their two remaining bargaining sessions fail to resolve the gridlock over terms of integrating Reno Air pilots into the company. The dispute exploded during February into a weeklong sick-out by pilots that caused cancellation of more than 6,600 flights.

The APA has been insisting that American adhere to the union contract, which would require Reno pilots to be paid at the same rate as present American Airline pilots. Management is trying to drag the process of equalizing pay over a year. The APA leadership was held in contempt of court and threatened with millions of dollars in fines by a US District Court judge when the pilots' job action got out of the union's control.

Given the strong possibilities of a failure of the present talks, the mediation agreement attempts to serve as a preventive formula against pilots launching another job action against American.

Reno Air emerged back in 1992 as an "alter ego" airline after American began pulling out of the West Coast market and furloughing its pilots. Reno took over essentially the same routes as those vacated by American. American Airlines also subsidized Reno by providing management services and awarding its frequent flier miles to Reno's customers. In 1997 American Airlines attempted to introduce the concept of a low-cost "airline-within-an-airline" into contract talks, a practice already established in other airlines. The APA rejected the overture as a return to the B-scale or two-tier wage system.

#### **Support workers strike Toronto schools**

About 14,000 caretakers, cleaners and other support workers went on strike February 27 against Canada's largest school board. Their action affects up to 570 schools in the Toronto area. The workers, who are organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, are fighting for job security and improved wages. CUPE leaders say that up to 4,358 jobs may be eliminated over the next four years and that many support staff have not seen a wage increase in eight years.

This is the latest battle being fought by workers over cuts to education introduced through the provincial government's new funding formula, which has sparked strikes and lockouts for teachers over the past months. Both sides in this dispute point to budget cuts of up to \$300 million required by the formula as the cause of the impasse.

A last minute effort to avoid the strike failed over the weekend but the school board decided to close only 21 schools Monday morning as talks continued. The union has said that all schools should be closed and has appealed to Education Minister Dave Johnson to restore funding to the board to its previous level.

#### **Public utility workers on strike in Toronto**

The strike by 1,500 workers against Toronto Hydro has entered its second week. The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, are fighting wage concessions and seeking job protection in anticipation of open competition in public utilities, which will start next year.

Toronto Hydro has filed an appeal with the Ontario Labour Relations Board for an arbitrated first contract settlement, which is allowed under new Tory laws, and would effectively end the strike. Under the new law a company can reorganize under a new name and declare all past contracts invalid.

#### **St. Catherines, Ontario auto workers hit with layoffs**

General Motors announced last week that it would lay off 1,160 workers at its St. Catherines plant in southern Ontario. This is in addition to at least 500 who have been on layoff since last year and are waiting for recall. This round of job losses represents almost one quarter of the Canadian Auto Workers members remaining at the plant. The work force will fall to 3,600, down from 9,100 of 10 years ago.

CAW head Buzz Hargrove indicated the job cuts might hamper upcoming contract negotiations. The union, as in the past, is appealing to the company to keep production in Canada on the basis that cheaper labor

costs make it more profitable than in the US.



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