

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Mass protests continue in Dominican Republic**

The Dominican Republic is in the midst of a social convulsion with cities in the interior of the island being transformed into battle zones between working people and the police. On March 22 mass protests took place to demand improvements in public services. Protesters attacked two police stations in the northern part of the country. Two policemen were shot and injured and 16 people were arrested. So far four people have been killed in the demonstrations.

As a result of International Monetary Fund-induced budget cuts and damage from Hurricane Georges, many interior roads are impassable, electric service is unreliable, drinking water is contaminated and there are almost no health services.

In the latest clash in the town of *Licey al Medio*, near Santiago, and about 90 miles north of Santo Domingo, protesters fired on police and set fire to a tobacco company truck.

## **Strike ends at Tyson Foods in Indiana**

Workers at Tyson Foods' Corydon, Indiana plant voted March 25 to accept a three-year contract and end their nearly three-month strike. The 275 poultry workers struck January 3 over the company's demand to eliminate work breaks previously won by workers. According to United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 227, the new contract will leave breaks in place for the first year of the contract. In the second and third years the company will gradually phase them out in exchange for hourly raises. During the strike the company was charged with Unfair Labor Practices, which included the eviction of striking workers from company housing.

Tyson Foods workers in Indiana are paid an average \$7.68 an hour--the lowest in the poultry industry. Average wages in the industry are only \$8.90 an hour.

Injury and illness rates for poultry workers are twice as high as those in manufacturing industries. Among the most common injuries are repetitive stress trauma, lacerations and amputations, all due in large part to production speedup.

In a 1995 General Accounting Office report on Worker Protection, Tyson was cited as one of 15 companies with numerous violations of more serious labor laws. Poultry processing companies routinely violate labor laws because of weak government enforcement. In 1997 Tyson was hit with a meager \$9,000 fine for an accident that resulted in the death of a worker.

Poultry industry profits have risen over 300 percent since 1987. Tyson, which was a prime financial backer of Bill Clinton's election campaigns, has benefited from lucrative government contracts helping to make it the number one poultry producer, commanding 27 percent of the market.

## **Teamsters end strike at Metex Manufacturing**

Members of Teamsters Local 11 ratified a contract March 21 bringing a four-day strike against two Metex Manufacturing plants in New Jersey to an end. No details of the five-year contract were made available. Workers at the Technical Products Division and its AFP Transformers subsidiary struck Metex over the company's offer of a five-year contract that proposed a freeze in the first year and 1 percent raises in each of the remaining four years. Metex is a subsidiary of United Capital Corporation and makes exhaust seals and airbag seals.

## **Vermont teachers strike**

Teachers at Hyde Park Elementary school in Vermont went on strike March 25 after negotiators for the union and school district bargained throughout the night and failed to reach an agreement. Only half of the students turned up for classes as school officials and substitute teachers attempted to keep classes in session.

Two days earlier teachers had rejected by a 33-2

margin the school board's proposal for a 5 percent wage increase over the next two years. Teachers were most concerned over the requirement that they pay 15 percent of their health insurance costs. Negotiations between the two sides had been going on for 18 months.

### **Newfoundland government threatens to break nurses strike**

The provincial Liberal government is threatening to adopt an emergency strikebreaking law to end a week-old strike by Newfoundland's 4,500 nurses. Talks between the Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses Union and government negotiators collapsed Sunday evening.

The chief issues in dispute are wages, workload and the government's refusal to transform so-called casual jobs into permanent positions.

Nurses in Newfoundland are the lowest paid in Canada. The Newfoundland government, which has imposed pay cuts and pay freezes on the province's public sector workers throughout the 1990s, is offering the nurses wage increases totaling 7 percent in a multiyear contract.



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