

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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General strike in Uruguay

Uruguay's workers carried out a 24-hour strike last Thursday to demand more jobs. The strike paralyzed all activity, including banks, schools and universities, as well as the manufacturing sector.

Officially, unemployment in Uruguay stands at 11.2 percent but the real figure is closer to 20 percent. The Brazilian economic crisis has made things worse. Thirty-five percent of Uruguay's exports go to Brazil.

The unions announced that they were striking because the government has refused to propose any policies to alleviate the unemployment crisis.

Student protests in Chile

Forty-four thousand students mobilized in Santiago to demand more scholarships and food programs. A group of hooded students blocked main intersections, allegedly hurling bottles full of gasoline at police. Police fired tear gas and water hoses and attacked students, who came in particular from the Pedagogic Institute where many working class youth attend. One thousand students managed to reach the presidential palace, La Moneda, to present a symbolic judicial document to President Eduardo Frei.

The document presented the fines which students owe for failing to pay back their student loans and demanded that the president pay the debt instead. The students promised not to stop their protests until the government budgets more money for education.

Protests began three weeks ago and have gotten bigger every day. Unless government debt relief is granted about 8,000 students will be forced to leave school this year. Students are demanding that Frei fully release the Solidarity Fund, the source of scholarships and food money for needy students at 25 Chilean universities. The fund's budget was cut by 160 million dollars this year.

In another development the students of the Catholic University in Santiago, not part of the protests, announced that they are demanding the authorities stop denying medical attention to students that are behind in their tuition.

Argentine teachers and students strike

Last Tuesday, Argentine teachers and students participated in a general strike to protest a \$280 million cut in education funds, part of \$1 billion in cuts being demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

The budget cut provoked massive protests in Buenos Aires and the resignation of the Education Minister, Susana Decibe. Her replacement denounced the teachers strike and threatened to discipline teachers who walked out.

These threats notwithstanding, the response was massive with schools in every province shut down. The students occupied many universities and held educational events. This forced the divided

government of President Menem to announce the restoration of \$150 million to education. Congress later met and restored the entire \$280 million.

The Buenos Aires stock exchange responded with a drop of 11 percent Thursday. Economics Minister Roque Fernandez then warned Congress that it could not ignore the financial markets. Fernandez said that he had originally relented to the students' demands because he remembered when, as a leftist student, he had witnessed the savage repression of students during the military regime of the 1970s. Once the markets responded, however, he said that he regretted his decision.

Public sector workers strike in Guyana

Teachers and professors joined 15,000 public sector workers this week in a strike for wages. The public sector workers have been on strike since April. They are demanding a 40 percent wage increase.

The government of Cheddi Jagan announced that it would only grant increases of 4.6 percent. In Guyana a university professor only makes \$177 per month and public employees must hold down two jobs to survive.

Finance Minister Bharrat Jagdeo warned that the government must obey the measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Therefore, he said the government would not offer public workers and teachers any more money.

Truckers protest in the Dominican Republic

The Leonel Fernandez administration mobilized the military in Santo Domingo and other Dominican cities, in response to strike action and protests against the government's economic policies. The protests are building up to a national strike against the regime. This week some truck drivers initiated a hunger strike, demanding that the government lower fuel prices and allow greater trucker participation in the government's transportation policies.

A week ago, eight thousand doctors in public clinics struck for better wages. The doctors have announced that they will renew their strike against President Fernandez.

During the protests police killed a woman in a confrontation with students demanding the reconstruction of their school.

Carhaulers vote on strike action

Teamsters truck drivers, who haul new vehicles from auto plants, ports and rail yards to dealerships, were expected to overwhelmingly approve strike action in balloting that ended Sunday. The nationwide contract covering 12,200 carhaulers, mechanics, yard and office workers at 17 major trucking firms expires May 31. Union workers are seeking improved health coverage and pensions and higher wages from trucking companies that have been buoyed by the record sales and profits of GM, Ford and DaimlerChrysler.

The likely strike target would be Allied Holding Inc., the largest of the trucking companies. The Decatur, Georgia-based company operates about 5,200 car- and truck-hauling rigs from 120 terminals in the US and Canada, and serves all the domestic and foreign automakers with North American plants, handling about two-thirds of

the US carhauling market.

In 1995, Teamsters struck Ryder System Inc.'s auto transport unit for 32 days, idling 500,000 cars and trucks, but eventually caving in to the company's concession demands. Allied bought Ryder's carhauling unit in 1997. The current negotiations are the first major ones for James P. Hoffa, who took over the 1.4 million-member union last month.

Northwest Airlines flight attendants, TWA employees may strike

Eleven thousand members of Teamsters Local 2000, working as flight attendants for Northwest Airlines, have been sent ballots to authorize a strike. The flight attendants have been working without a contract for more than two years. Ballots have not yet been returned. The National Mediation Board has called the two sides back to the bargaining table.

Meanwhile International Association of Machinists Local 1650, representing 16,000 flight attendants, ground personnel and other employees at Trans World Airlines, said Friday that it has declined to enter binding arbitration in contract talks, setting the stage for a potential June strike against the nation's eighth largest airline. Workers have been without new contract terms since August 1997 when the previous contract became amendable. Under federal law, workers cannot strike unless the National Mediation Board declares an impasse, which is followed by a 30-day cooling-off period. The union said the cooling off period began on May 15.

Sears fined for violating child labor laws

Sears, Roebuck and Co., the second largest retailer in the US, has agreed to pay a \$325,000 fine to settle a US Labor Department lawsuit over the violation of child labor laws. The Labor Department said an investigation of 71 of the company's 845 full-line stores found that 44 of them permitted 16- and 17-year-old workers to illegally operate power machinery. In addition, some 15 year olds were found to have worked more hours than permitted by federal law.

Sears management did not admit to any liability and said the fine would not have any adverse effect on the company's financial results. In addition to the token fine, the company agreed to enhance training, provide informational material to parents and review its child labor practices. Labor Secretary Alexis Herman hailed Sears for "taking real leadership" on the issue. Sixty percent of all teenagers with jobs work in the retail industry, where they are regularly subjected to long hours and low pay.

Temps at Microsoft win lawsuit

An appeals court ruled last week that thousands of temporary workers for Microsoft Corp. are eligible for stock benefits that the Seattle-based software giant has denied them. In a ruling handed down May 12, the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals significantly expanded the class of workers eligible to apply for damages in a long-running lawsuit.

Rather than just a relatively narrow group of so-called "permatemp" employees who worked for Microsoft from 1987 to 1990, the appeals court ruled the company's lucrative employee stock purchase plan must be opened to all "common law" employees from 1986 to the present. That effectively opens the stock purchase plan to any temporary or contract worker who meets its requirements of having worked at least half-time for five months of any year since the company went public in 1986. That could make well over 10,000 past and present workers eligible for damages based on stock benefits they should have received years ago, said David Stobaugh, attorney for the plaintiffs in the long-running lawsuit.

Stobaugh said the ruling could be read broadly to mean that temporary employees and contract workers at companies throughout the Western region served by the appeals court could claim the same benefits as full-time staffers. The decision was met with outrage by others in the technology sector, which depends heavily on temporary workers and independent contractors who are paid substandard wages and benefits.

Bell Canada strike ends

The bitter strike by 9,500 Bell Canada operators and technicians ended Saturday after workers voted by an 80 percent margin to accept a tentative agreement on a new five-year contract.

The strike that began April 9 was settled without addressing the transfer of 1,300 of Bell's 2,300 operators to US-based Excell Global Services at nearly half their Bell wages—the issue that provoked the strike. The union leadership nevertheless hailed the deal as a victory saying that even more operators could have been transferred.

While the union also boasted of the increased severance package for operators who leave the company, the agreement will in reality translate into huge job losses. It is expected that nearly half of the operators facing transfer would quit rather than see their pay drop from \$19.50 to \$10 an hour.

Job losses at Nortel Networks and British Columbia copper mine

Nortel Networks Corp. last week announced its intention to lay off up to 2,400 workers in southern Ontario as a result of the sell-off of three of its manufacturing facilities in the province.

While 400 workers will be fired outright, the other 2,000 will have to wait and see whether their new employer will keep them on and under what terms. The company is in negotiations with a number of prospective buyers around the world, but made clear that they are determined to "divest those facilities."

The job cuts in Ontario are part of the reorganization of Nortel that will ultimately see the layoff of 8,000 of the company's 80,000 employees worldwide. Nearly one-third of those are in Canada and most of those in Ontario.

Meanwhile the giant Highland Valley copper mine in British Columbia shut down indefinitely last Saturday, following the collapse of negotiations Thursday. Talks between the owners and United Steel Workers of America (USWA) Local 7619 that represents workers at the mine had been ongoing since the last contract expired in September.

Cominco Ltd, which owns 50 percent of the mine, had threatened a shutdown last January, citing falling copper prices, if workers were not willing to accept substantial wage cuts. Prices have risen since that time, but industry analysts claim that shutting higher cost mines such as Highland will help to maintain copper prices. The USWA is reported to have offered to forgo productivity bonuses amounting to \$12 million a year in savings to the company, but this was deemed insufficient. It is likely that, without even larger concessions from workers than originally sought, the mine will not reopen.



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