

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 January 2000

Mexican army and police attack petrochemical workers

The Mexican army and police expelled 1,500 workers who were occupying the Ingenieros Civiles Asociados company. The workers began occupying the plant in Cactus, Chiapas on January 20 and detained 57 Pemex executives and technicians for eight hours. The workers are demanding a minimum increase of \$100 a month for laborers and \$180 for higher skilled workers. They are also calling for better preparation of the food they are being served.

In the state of Tabasco, petrochemical workers are being accused of having vandalized some temporary offices of the company near the Villahermosa plant, which processes 90 percent of Mexico's natural gas. Gas delivery was not affected, however.

Strike threat in Nicaragua

Oscar Carrion, leader of the Nicaraguan energy workers, threatened a national strike as negotiations broke down with the government over the privatization of electric utilities. He is advocating a bill in the National Assembly which would declare this privatization unconstitutional.

Honduran transport and oil workers on strike

Honduras has been hit by a week-long strike of heavy cargo truck drivers and oil workers. The drivers are demanding better wages and working conditions. This is the first transport strike against President Carlos Flores.

Obdulio Acosta, leader of the Union of Heavy Equipment, announced that the union's intent is to pressure the government to the bargaining table. He stressed that as long as the government threatens the workers, the strike will continue indefinitely. The highway between the port of Puerto Cortes and the capital of Tegucigalpa is blockaded with trucks.

Peruvian unemployed construction workers march

In the capital of Lima on January 18, unemployed construction workers, their wives and families marched on the Government Palace to demand jobs. The general secretary of the Federation of Civil Construction Workers explained that the government's neo-liberal model had failed. As a result of these policies, Peru now has 250,000 unemployed construction workers. Wages have been frozen for five years, and workers have no access to social security

benefits.

On January 26 the construction workers are staging a national day of action. For February 16 another national mobilization will be a rehearsal for a national strike to take place in March. Peru's presidential elections are scheduled for April 9.

Insurance document details theft by AFSCME union officials

The American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) admitted January 21 that it submitted a document to its insurance company last fall detailing losses resulting from theft and fraud by union officials.

AFSCME refused to make available the document, but the *New York Times* received a leak that alleged it details \$4.6 million in claims involving 35 officials from locals in New York, Indiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Activities included a variety of fraudulent acts, from using credit cards to cover personal financial affairs to theft of funds.

The most egregious act involves an official of AFSCME District Council 37 in New York City where \$2.2 million was stolen. Another two dozen officials of District Council 37 have also been indicted. In a Milwaukee local \$96,000 was embezzled by an ousted treasurer. Another \$51,000 was pilfered by an official at District Council 20 in Washington and \$13,500 was lifted by the treasurer of a local in Elkhart, Indiana.

Overnite announces loss due to Teamsters strike

The strikebound Overnite Transportation Company, the largest nonunion trucking operation in the US, reported a \$13 million operating loss in the fourth quarter. The company claims to have spent \$21 million to combat an unfair labor practices strike launched by the Teamsters last October 24.

The Teamsters unfair labor practices strike followed confessions by a former Overnite operations manager who confirmed the company sought to intimidate workers supporting a Teamsters organizing effort by firing of hundreds of drivers and dockworkers. Over 1,000 individual violations were filed with the National Labor Relations Board charging intimidation, harassment and unlawful discharge.

But Teamsters appeals to the workforce have not been able to win over a majority of the workers. Overnite says the union only represents 1,792 of its 11,500 employees at 166 terminals. And of those, only 758 are on strike. The Teamsters claim they represent 3,600 members at 37 terminals.

While rank-and-file Overnite workers struck to improve their working conditions and living standards, the Teamsters bureaucracy has been motivated by other factors. One of the main reasons the Teamsters officials want Overnite unionized is to transfer the control of millions of dollars in pension funds from the company to the union. Moreover, President James P. Hoffa is also seeking to shore up the declining dues base of the union, which has lost hundreds of thousands of members since the deregulation of the trucking industry in the 1970s.

Rather than carrying out a genuine struggle to mobilize Teamsters members throughout the industry, Hoffa has relied on public relations stunts and appeals to Overnite's corporate directors. Teamsters National Organizing Director John Murphy seized on the company's operating losses as a way to appeal to Overnite's parent corporation, rail giant Union Pacific Corporation. "This \$30 million reversal from last year is a wake-up call for Overnite. Overnite is learning that breaking the law doesn't pay. If Leo Suggs believes Union Pacific is going to continue to back him and turn a blind eye to Overnite's illegal conduct, he's about to learn a very hard business lesson."

Teamsters spokesman David Cameron said, "They are businessmen. They look at the bottom line. This should have been a bang-up quarter for [Overnite]."

Construction trade retirees in California sue union pension fund trustees

Three retired members of the carpenters union in southern California filed a lawsuit against trustees of a \$2 billion pension fund for wrongful investment and lucrative handouts to the financial advisor.

Among the trustees of the Southern California pension fund named in the suit are Ronald N. Tutor, a construction boss, financial advisor Richard C. Blum, the husband of US Senator Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Douglas McCarron, president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. The suit also includes trustees of a separate \$500 million pension fund for the union bureaucracy.

The suit charges that in 1997 the trustees invested \$27 million in assets managed by Blum and his companies. It also alleges during that same year Blum received \$8 million in payments for investment advice "grossly out of proportion to the value of such services."

The suit aims at removing the trustees and firing Blum

while appealing for an injunction to bar the defendants from authorizing any further investments of the funds assets.

Frontier flight attendants to seek union representation

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) filed a petition January 19 with the National Mediation Board seeking a union representation election for attendants at Frontier Airlines. The AFA claims "Frontier made promises a year ago to flight attendants that they didn't keep. That's why flight attendants want a union that will fight for them and improve working conditions." Frontier, based in Denver, Colorado, employs more than 320 flight attendants and provides services to 21 cities.

Winnipeg workers rally to save jobs

Several hundred workers staged a demonstration in Winnipeg, Manitoba last Saturday in a bid to save their jobs at Versatile Farm Equipment. The plant in nearby Fort Gary is owned by an American company, New Holland NV, which, following years of layoffs, wants to put it up for sale. Of the more than 800 unionized workers employed at the plant two years ago, only 215 still have jobs with Versatile.

The local leadership of the Canadian Auto Workers, which represents workers at the plant, have said they hope prospective buyers will consider, among other incentives, the lower Canadian dollar and much lower health premiums for workers here than in the United States.

University of Toronto threatens jobs of striking teaching assistants

Teaching assistants who have been on strike since January 7 against the University of Toronto could face job losses when they return to work, according to a university spokesperson. Talks, which had broken down, resumed January 24, but the issue of job cuts threatens to scuttle this latest round of negotiations.

According to Vice Provost David Cook, some of the classes currently taught by teaching assistants could be restructured as a result of the strike, resulting in the elimination of those jobs. Mikael Swayze, chief negotiator for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3902, which represents the strikers, said the union is filing a complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board.



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