

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 February 2000

Salvadorean police seize hospitals and clinics to end doctors' strike

On February 15 over 200 Salvadorean police took over 15 public hospitals and clinics in El Salvador's capital city of San Salvador. The facilities had been shut down for two days as a result of a national strike against privatization plans. Some strikers were beaten, according to strike leaders.

Meanwhile, the Medical College of El Salvador announced that three-fourths of its members are on strike at 110 public hospitals, communal clinics and other medical facilities run by the Salvadoran Social Security system.

The doctors, who are opposing the privatization of Social Security, are striking in solidarity with social security employees whose strike has already lasted 92 days.

Argentine general strike set for February 24

The main workers federation in Argentina, the CGT, has scheduled a one-day mobilization and general strike for next Thursday. It is demanding that the De La Rúa government drop parts of a new labor law that would allow for probationary periods of up to six months for new workers and that would favor local over national collective bargaining.

De La Rúa has declared that the government will not back down. For its part, the CGT leaders are said to be frantically searching for compromise language that will permit them to lift a mobilization that some fear will get out of hand.

The government also faces a possible lockout by private transportation companies on that same day. The operators are upset about a 30 percent increase in fuel prices in six months.

Even though Argentina is virtually petroleum self-sufficient, producers insist on matching international oil prices, making its fuels among the most expensive in the world.

This will be the first mass mobilization faced by the De La Rúa administration since it took office three months ago.

Argentine bishop warns of severe social crisis

Pedro Olmedo, archbishop of Argentina's city of Humahuaca in Jujuy Province, warned that a social time bomb is about to explode.

Last week hundreds of unemployed and their families blocked the international highway into Bolivia and several other routes in the province to protest a wave of layoffs and unpaid wages.

Like the rest of the northern Argentine provinces, Jujuy is bankrupt. The De La Rúa government is offering federal help only if Jujuy undertakes massive layoffs of public employees.

Hundreds occupy oil installations in Guatemala

About 1,500 Guatemalan farmers occupied the "Basic Resources" oil refinery in the northern region of Peten. Last weekend the farmers shut down the pipeline that flows into the

refinery. They are also demanding that 10 million trees be planted to replenish the Peten forests.

The protest was in solidarity with the Civil Association of Guatemalan Transport. The Transport Association is demanding the right to transport asphalt.

Mexican science students strike

Mexican science students carried out a brief strike at the UNAM campus on February 15. Since the end of the 10-month strike at the UNAM campus, science students took the lead in resisting the police and government repression. The students insist that none of their original demands have been seriously addressed and are also demanding the release of 120 students still in jail.

Peruvian protesters try to take over the Presidential Palace

On February 16, 1,000 protesters attempted to enter the Presidential Residence in Lima, Peru's capital. Soldiers and police sprayed tear gas into the crowd. The workers, teachers and students were marching against President Fujimori's economic policies and against his attempt at a third term in the upcoming April 9 elections.

The protests lasted all day on Wednesday into early the next morning. Marchers erected and lit pyres, shouted slogans, and beat drums to show their discontent. They denounced the use of housing programs to buy votes for Fujimori.

Nicaraguan workers protest poverty

Five thousand workers, supporters of the United Workers Front (FUT), marched through the streets of Nicaragua's capital Managua on February 17. They demanded an end to government corruption and policies to end the endemic poverty that afflicts workers and farmers.

Union leader Gustavo Porras demanded that the National Assembly withdraw draft legislation to privatize Social Security. He called for a national dialogue on the issue of workers' pensions.

The FUT is also proposing that the National Assembly reduce fuel and public transportation taxes and a law to protect the collective bargaining rights of private sector workers.

Along the march, workers shouted slogans denouncing high utility rates and the low quality of health and education services.

Brazilian telephone workers to strike

Telephone workers in the State of Rio Grande do Sul are threatening an indefinite strike against the Companhia Riograndense de Telecomunicações (CRT) this week. On February 17 company stockholders canceled wage negotiations with the workers.

Federal mediator to intervene again in Boeing conflict

The director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service will return to Seattle February 22 to meet separately with the Boeing Company and the Society of Professional Engineering

Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) in an effort to halt the strike by engineering and technical workers that has crippled the company's production of jets.

Richard Barnes, who directs the federal agency, first entered the situation just over a week ago but failed to broker an agreement. Barnes's decision to return was preceded by several days of indecision within the department over whether to intervene as the strike has engulfed nearly the entire bargaining unit of 21,000 members, something neither the union bureaucracy nor the company anticipated. When the strike began, only 63 percent of the bargaining unit even belonged to the union.

Failure to end Miami independent truckers strike causes fear

A strike by independent truckers in South Florida is causing concern throughout the business community. Throughout the US, rising diesel fuel costs have been pinching the living standards of owner-operators and the indifference of transport corporations have caused many protests, such as the one in Seattle late last year.

In Florida's Miami-Dade and Broward counties a strike is ongoing and has paralyzed the transfer of cargo at the area's port. According to trade officials some \$136 million worth of cargo normally passes through Miami Customs district on an average day. Products are sitting in containers on the docks and warehouses are being forced to lay off workers, further driving up the unemployment rate in Miami, which already runs ahead of the rest of nation.

Companies claim they are willing to anti-up to meet the cost of rising fuel prices. The *Miami Herald* quotes Greg Eifert, an executive with Ramco Trading, saying: "I don't think there's a customer, including ourselves, who wouldn't be willing to pay more."

But that alone cannot suffice to end the strike. Miami-area truckers have a long list of grievances in addition to fuel costs. Truckers must buy insurance from the companies they work for who in turn gouge them through premiums. They also endure delays of up to 3 hours at Miami's port waiting to receive loads.

The greatest fear of the Miami Chamber of Commerce is that the protracted strike will cause a shift in trade routes away from the Miami area.

Canadian truckers protest spiraling fuel prices

Independent truck drivers in centers across the country have held meetings and protests over the past week to draw attention to the crisis they face from record-high costs for diesel fuel. In New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario truckers have either chosen to stop driving or have blocked main highways, in some cases halting all commercial traffic.

In Quebec, truckers blocked roads in the northwestern area of the Abitibi last Thursday restricting commercial traffic from Ontario. Hundreds of truckers have set up two blockades on the Trans-Canada Highway at the Nova Scotia-New Brunswick boundary demanding that toll booths be shut down. On Sunday, in Oshawa Ontario, about 1,000 truckers who have pulled their rigs off the road, held a protest to demand a government cap on fuel prices.

Over the past year the cost of oil has risen by over 150 percent, forcing independent truckers who pay for their own fuel out of contract revenues to bear the brunt of higher prices. In Ontario, truck drivers who transport over 80 percent of that province's trade

with the US have been refused any compensation by shipping companies for added fuel costs. Across Canada over 200,000 commercial truck drivers haul products for automobile, retail and manufacturing companies.

Trucking associations have launched appeals to both provincial and federal governments to reduce fuel taxes. Gas now costs as much as 80 cents a liter in some parts of the country, and taxes account for 30 cents of that. Addressing an Ontario government task force on fuel pricing, David Bradley, Ontario Trucking Association (OTA) president, said that "for too many years, successive governments have viewed the provincial diesel fuel tax—which accounts for 25 percent of the current rack price of diesel—as a cash cow." In Quebec, Premier Lucien Bouchard said last Wednesday that his government was considering a special financial package to truckers to help compensate their losses.

The climb in fuel prices is not restricted to Canada and has resulted in similar protests in the US (*see above*). These actions take place against the backdrop of discussions by oil producing countries on the need to increase crude oil output. Last year gas prices climbed to their highest level since the Gulf War.

Nova Scotia steelworkers fight sell-off deal

Hundreds of steelworkers stormed into a Nova Scotia government office last Friday in a protest sparked by the cancellation of a planned meeting with the minister of economic development Gordon Balser. The workers are employed at Sydney Steel (Sysco), a government owned company which is being shut down and is up for sale.

A deal to sell the plant fell through earlier this month prompting the government to bring in receivers, Ernst and Young, who have placed ads in local papers offering the sale of the whole or any part of Sysco to interested buyers. This has elicited objections from the United Steel Workers (USWA), which represents the workers, who say the government should try to sell the plant as an operating business to save jobs. The company has chronically operated at a loss despite funding of over \$3 billion from the Nova Scotia government over the last three decades

The meeting with the minister had been scheduled regarding pensions for the approximately 650 workers who could lose their jobs if a new buyer isn't found. James Spurr, the provincial cabinet secretary, told the local USWA President Bill McNeil that "while that [sale] process is unfolding, we do not believe that meetings or discussions with your union or other employee groups would be productive." While the union has abandoned any further effort to save jobs at the plant, workers are concerned they may not even be entitled to contract benefits when the plant is either closed or sold.



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