

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 March 2000

Oil workers strike in Venezuela

In response to an impasse in contract negotiations, the Venezuelan Oil Workers Union, Fedetrol, began an indefinite strike on March 3, involving 60,000 workers. The refineries put a contingency plan into effect to maintain production as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez declared the strike illegal. State Oil executive Hector Ciavaldini warned workers not to take part in Fedetrol's strike, also intimating that the government would attempt to use local unions, organized at the plant level, to scab on the strike.

With a daily export of over 2.5 million barrels, Venezuela is the second largest supplier of oil to the United States, and a shutdown of Venezuelan oil production would have an international impact.

Workers demand freedom for imprisoned Mexican students

Writing signs with their own blood, union members, parents and friends are seeking to dramatize their demand that jailed university students be freed. Over 200 university students that participated in the 10-month strike against the national university UNAM are still imprisoned. UNAM is the largest and one of the most prestigious universities in Latin America.

The students have been charged with trespassing, kidnapping and burglary. They are also being charged with being a "danger to society," for which they are being denied bail. Conditions are crowded and unsanitary, causing many to become ill.

The imprisoned students have vowed to continue their fight for free, accessible education for all.

Colombian "recyclers" protest

On Friday, 200 young homeless people, known as "recyclers," from Cartucho Street protested in Bogota, the capital of Colombia. They burned a car and lit firecrackers, demanding decent homes. One protester was killed, and nine were left wounded. The "recyclers" live in dire poverty on Cartucho Street, a crowded and dilapidated area of shanties. It is infamous for the desperate conditions of its inhabitants, where children become addicted to gasoline inhalation and girls become prostitutes at a very early age to survive. A year ago, Bogota's Mayor Enrique Pe-alosa promised to move the "recyclers" to decent homes in another part of the city as part of an urban renewal project. This has been another empty promise.

Argentine immigrant workers endure inhuman treatment

Undocumented immigrants endure many hardships in Argentina's capital of Buenos Aires. They are forced to work under dangerous and unhealthy conditions, often for months without days off, according to a city report. On February 27 the Buenos Aires *Clarín* quoted Official Ombudsman Alejandro Nato as saying, "There is no slavery census. However, our estimates indicate that at least 1,000 people work under subhuman

conditions."

Nato's office has received scores of grievances from undocumented immigrants, including reports of beatings, unpaid wages and unsanitary working conditions. In some cases workers have been forced to work up to 15 hours a day without days off. They are badly fed and are often shorted in their wages.

Guillermo Farias, subdirector of Federal Taxation, reports that inspectors find pots of bad food next to very advanced machines. Two weeks ago, Farias's office participated in 81 raids of sweatshops that employ immigrant labor. Some factories practice "warm-bed" procedures in which workers take round-the-clock five-hour breaks inside the plant itself. Following each break, the next shift relieves them. The beds never get cold.

These conditions notwithstanding, immigrants continue to come in from Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru. When they reach Buenos Aires they face double-digit unemployment. Being undocumented, they are easily taken advantage of by many employers.

Wal-Mart shuts meat departments after union vote

Retail giant Wal-Mart announced that it will shut down its meat-cutting operations in 180 stores after butchers at a Wal-Mart Supercenter in Jacksonville, Texas voted to bring a union into the store for the first time in the chain's history. In February the butchers voted 7-3 to unionize their department. The company will eliminate meat-cutting operations at stores in Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas, and will sell only prepackaged meat. Local and national officials from the United Food and Commercial Workers union said Wal-Mart was responding not only to the Jacksonville vote but to a pending election at its store in Palestine, Texas, and organizing efforts at about 20 Wal-Marts around the country.

Union drive fails among Delta ramp workers

The Transport Workers Union failed by a considerable margin to win support among Delta Air Lines' baggage and cargo workers for a unionization vote March 3. Only 1,868 of the 10,700 workers in the potential bargaining unit returned ballots endorsing the TWU.

Delta claimed the vote "confirms that Delta's people recognize that a direct partnership between the company and Delta people works best." But in the lead-up to the vote the airline did make concessions to the workforce in an effort to sway workers from supporting the TWU. In January lower seniority ramp workers received raises of up to 15 percent. Other workers obtained raises in the 3 to 15 percent range. In February the company announced it would give all employees a free home computer. Delta also issued a video that warned unionization would block upward mobility within the company.

The TWU claims that Delta questioned individual workers about

their vote and there were other incidents of intimidation and harassment. The union is planning to consult attorneys about legal action concerning the company's campaign against the union drive.

Regardless of the company's campaign, it is significant that the TWU was not able to garner significant support, despite worsening conditions for airline workers over the last decade. The airline workers' unions have accepted concession after concession and have collaborated with the airlines in imposing speed-up and cost-cutting. Delta is one of the least unionized airlines. Last October, 107 ground pilot training instructors voted to join the TWU. Another 200 flight dispatchers are also unionized.

Florida tomato pickers demand decent wage

Some 36 Florida farmworkers, along with 200 supporters, ended a 15-day, 230-mile march from Fort Meyers to Orlando on March 4, to protest low wages and poor working conditions in the tomato fields. They ended their march in front of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association offices. The association bosses refused to meet with the workers.

The action, led by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, follows a work stoppage last December and a hunger strike by six tomato pickers two seasons ago. "What we want first is a dialog with the growers," Lucas Benitez, a coalition leader, told the Associated Press. Laura Germino, a march coordinator, added, "They're not asking for overtime. They're not asking for vacation time.... They're asking for the right to talk to their bosses for a decent wage."

Informational picketing against job threat at Reuters

Members of the Newspaper Guild at Reuters held noon-hour informational pickets at locations in New York, Washington and Los Angeles to protest an company plan that could threaten jobs and living standards as contract talks prepare to get under way.

London-based Reuters recently announced its intention to increase its presence on the Internet. The Newspaper Guild believes that the company will attempt to shift employees from positions under union jurisdiction to new categories that would allow the renunciation of contractual obligations to the 600 union members. The Guild, Local 31003 of the Communications Workers of America, represents print, photo and television journalists, technicians, network controllers and sales support, finance and clerical staff at Reuters.

Negotiations for a new contract are slated to begin this coming week. Guild members have been without a contract for more than two years and their last wage increase came on March 1, 1997.

The Guild is also collecting forms from Reuters union members pledging that they will "work to rule," and refuse overtime unless ordered. Members will also make themselves less accessible when off duty.

When Reuters announced its plan for Internet expansion Guild members responded with a 12-day byline strike during which the overwhelming majority of Reuters news and pictures in the US was issued anonymously. Union members have also given strike authorization.

Ontario truckers protest continues as fuel prices rise

While truckers across the country continued talks with employers and government this week, protests continued as fuel prices saw a further increase of up to 8 cents a liter or 12 percent

over the past week. Despite an appeal from both the Ontario Trucking Association and the new National Truckers Association, truckers in a number of cities across Ontario continued their actions.

In Toronto, truckers stepped up their campaign last week, targeting fuel depots with blockades resulting in shortages at pumps across the city. By February 29 more than 75 service stations were reported to have run out of gasoline. Ontario Consumer Minister Bob Runciman has called on truckers to stop their protests saying, "We are all sympathetic to the problems they are facing with fuel price escalation, but the reality is they are breaking the law and that is not something we are going to endorse." Police have for the most part refrained from taking any action, and Runciman has since agreed to meet with truckers to discuss the problem.

In Ottawa, the nation's capital, over 200 rigs blockaded Parliament Hill March 3 in an effort to pressure the federal government to address their concerns over record-high fuel prices. The truckers were demanding a meeting with either the prime minister or Finance Minister Paul Martin to discuss a cut in fuel taxes, but had to settle instead for Mac Harb, a little known backbencher.

Governments at every level have refused to offer any relief in taxes that account for as much as a third of the cost of fuel, each pinning responsibility on the other. Many have suggested that higher prices be passed on to consumers, but contracts for independent truckers do not allow for such an increase, leaving the truckers to bear the increased burden alone.

Toronto council seeks confrontation with municipal workers

A strike by 20,000 municipal workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 79, which would virtually shut down this city, is one big step closer this week. Following a unanimous vote taken by city council, the Ontario Ministry of Labour has been asked for, and is expected to give, a "no-board" report which would put workers in a strike position 16 days later.

Following last week's provocation from Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman, daring the union to go on strike, this is a further attack on the collective bargaining process. Lastman added. "They may strike at the end of the 16 days of the 'no-board' or we may say ... 'We're going to lock you out.'"

The city is offering a wage increase of 7.5 percent over three years, including a \$400 signing bonus, the same deal accepted by other city workers. The union is insisting that instead of the signing bonus they make the contract retroactive to the expiry of the last contract in 1998. A strike or lock-out could begin by the end of the month.



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