

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 June 2000

Second general strike against De la Rúa government in Argentina

Millions of workers struck on Friday, June 9 in Argentina against an economic "adjustment" plan imposed by the government of Fernando De la Rúa. This is the second general strike in the last month against De la Rúa, who took power six months ago. The strike was a culmination of three days of mobilizations. On Friday, most public transportation was paralyzed, bridges and roads into industrial areas in Buenos Aires were blocked and educational, medical and financial activities were at a standstill.

Among other measures, De la Rúa imposed wage cuts, the closure of government offices and cuts in retirement benefits for those younger than 60. While noting that the strike had been widely observed, De la Rúa insisted that the economic measures would stay in place. In a previous austerity program the government cut \$400 million from the budget and raised taxes by \$2 billion.

Two million of Argentina's thirty-four million people unemployed. One out of every three urban residents live in poverty and 12 percent do not earn enough to ensure minimum daily nutritional requirements. On May 5 a general strike against labor law reforms was repressed by the police.

General strike in Uruguay

On Thursday, June 8 a general strike was launched in Uruguay, as Jorge Batlle's government marked its one hundredth day in office. The 24-hour walkout demanded that the government create more jobs and provide health benefits and decent housing. Throughout the day rallies in Montevideo and other cities denounced Batlle's economic policies. The PIT-CNT (National Workers Federation) of Uruguay is also demanding the cancellation of privatization legislation.

Battle indicated that the strike had been "of little use" and that his policies of budget cuts and privatizations would proceed. Batlle suggested that the Uruguayan labor movement should demand that other countries open their borders to Uruguayan exports as a way of solving Uruguay's economic crisis.

Mexico: last of student strike leaders released from jail

The last six jailed leaders of the 10-month-long protests at UNAM (the Spanish acronym for National Autonomous University of Mexico) were released June 8 in Mexico City. The student leaders had been imprisoned since February, when the police and military put an end to the strike against the introduction of fees at Latin America's largest university. More than 500 supporters greeted the students as they left jail. The release appears to signify that none of the more than 200 students currently being prosecuted will be charged with serious crimes.

Teachers march in Mexico City

Thousands of teachers demanding improved wages marched and rallied in Mexico City last week. The teachers, from southern Mexican states, have been marching and demonstrating throughout the country for over 21 days. President Ernesto Zedillo's government has backed down from its earlier insistence that teachers' wages were a matter for the states and not the federal government. The government is now negotiating with the teachers union (CNTE). During the demonstration, groups of teachers joined a picket line of Aeromexico baggage handlers who were protesting government intervention against their strike. The teachers chanted "you are not alone" and "stay firm" in solidarity with the baggage handlers.

Paraguayan protests against the International Monetary Fund

On the evening of June 9 more than 3,000 public employees demonstrated in Asuncion, Paraguay to protest a visit by IMF officials in Paraguay. The peaceful protest, which took place under heavy police presence, was organized by the National Workers Organization (CNT). At the rally, a leader of the transport workers declared that the IMF measures imposed on Paraguay were sinking workers deeper into poverty. At the rally a casket was burned to symbolize the death of the IMF. The head of the IMF group, Juan Carlos Jaramillo, declared that Paraguay must reduce its fiscal deficit by privatizing unprofitable state companies, slashing expenditures and vigorously prosecuting tax evasion.

Dayton, Ohio transit workers reject union-backed contract

Dayton, Ohio bus drivers, members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1385, have rejected for the second time in two months a tentative contract brought back by the union leadership. Rank-and-file drivers collided with the ATU leaders on the issue of wages and the establishment of a new classification of workers. The union and management have resumed talks under the auspices of a mediator.

The tentative agreement contained only a 2.8 percent increase in wages. It also called for the setting up of a fourth wage tier, which would allow the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to pay so-called combination drivers \$11.02 an hour for driving buses and routes for which other drivers are paid as much as \$19.00 an hour.

A young worker told local television reporters, "The union is not doing anything for us and we should get them all out of office." A middle-aged woman driver, pointing to her uniform patch, said, "I am an RTA operator also and I should make the same money as others. We are all RTA." A shuttle bus operator added that workers were talking about a walkout, but that he didn't want to strike "with the union leaders we have." Nevertheless, he said, "I can't make a living with what I'm paid now—\$8.50 an hour."

Maryland tire workers press case against Goodyear for job-related illnesses

Workers suffering from job-related illnesses appealed to the 4th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Virginia to hear their case charging Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company with liability for their suffering. Sixty-six workers who worked at the Kelly-Springfield Tire Co. in Cumberland, Maryland have charged that their health was undermined by exposure to hazardous chemicals used in the tire-making process. Their initial suit remained dormant for years before being dismissed by a US district judge in 1997. An appeal got the case reinstated, but in 1999 it was thrown out a second time. With 31 of the plaintiffs now deceased this may be the last opportunity to have the case reinstated.

When the National Institutes for Occupational Safety and Health surveyed the plant in 1979, it found the cancer-causing chemical nitrosamine present at levels 10 times higher than those found in any other American rubber plant. But NIOSH inspectors did not find that the workers most exposed to nitrosamine were dying from cancer at a rate higher than other Kelly workers. One element in the tire making process, soapstone, used to keep rubber slabs from sticking together, may have been contaminated with asbestos fibers. Workers described black and white dust filling the environment to such a degree that they could not distinguish objects 50 feet away. One worker described a container he worked with as being labeled "DO NOT INHALE."

Just before the plant was closed in 1987, 34 workers sued for damages due to their working conditions. Goodyear settled out of court for a reported \$10-15 million, in a settlement that kept details confidential.

Minneapolis hotel workers vote to strike

Minneapolis hotel workers voted by a 94 percent margin June 8 to reject an offer by nine of the area's major hotels and to approve strike action. Two-thirds of the 1,500 members of Local 17 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) cast ballots that rejected a five-year agreement offering 12 to 15 percent pay raises. Starting wages are \$8.50 an hour. The union says it wants increases of 21 to 46 percent along with greater employer contributions to medical and retirement packages. On June 9 several hundred workers and their supporters marched from the Regal Hotel to the Hilton in downtown Minneapolis.

The union is calling attention to the fact that the hotels, among them the Hilton, Radisson, Holiday Inn and Best Western, receive hefty public subsidies for providing jobs, which in some cases barely pay more than poverty wages. More than 30 percent of the hotel workforce are recently arrived immigrants.

Local union sues UFCW International over collusion with Meijer's management

Local 911 of the United Food and Commercial Workers union in Toledo, Ohio has filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the UFCW International for colluding with the Meijer retail chain against the local union. During negotiations with Meijer Inc. Local 911 organized protests to strengthen its bargaining position. To rein in the local, the UFCW International wrote Local 911 officials that they couldn't boycott or picket Meijer stores—and then provided Meijer with a copy of the letter. Telling Meijer of the restrictions, an attorney for the local said, "cut the local's legs off" in further

bargaining. The UFCW International intervened again by awarding a new Meijer store in Local 911's jurisdiction to an outside local.

Separate agreement undermines strike at *Calgary Herald*

One of the two unions on strike against the *Calgary Herald* voted Saturday, June 10 to accept key concessions after a long and bitter battle against the paper's notoriously anti-union owner, publishing magnate Conrad Black

The settlement involves distribution workers who have been on strike since last November, as well as press operators in the same union who joined their co-workers on the picket line six weeks ago. The sellout of the strike by the Graphic Communications International Union (GCIU), while a blow for its members, augurs badly for editorial staff in a separate union, who have been fighting for a first contract since the seven-month strike began.

Voting results showed deep division within bargaining units over the deal, which gave in on the central issues of wages and shift work. With recommendation from the union leadership, the contract was accepted by about three-quarters of voting participants. The four-year deal gives pressmen a 3 percent raise in the first year and 2.5 percent in each following year. Two of the three shifts for pressmen will now go to five day weeks from four, while mail room workers will see the top rate for new workers cut from \$15 an hour to \$11. The 103 workers affected are expected to return to work by mid-week.

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), which represents the 88 newsroom and distribution staff still on strike, has recently dropped the key demand for a seniority clause to protect older workers. This amounts to a declaration of surrender by the union. The company has nevertheless refused to resume talks and the *Herald* has continued to publish throughout the dispute using scab replacements.

Montreal transit strike looms

Two thousand maintenance workers at the Montreal Urban Community Transit Commission (MUCTC) are set to stage a 56-hour strike this coming weekend during the annual running of the Montreal Grand Prix, which attracts race fans from around the world.

The union has vowed to expand the work stoppage into a general strike if the provincial government passes threatened legislation restricting the weekend action. A decision from the Essential Services Council on Tuesday, June 13 will determine the next step in the dispute between the Montreal Transit Commission and the union representing maintenance workers.

A central issue in the dispute is the \$98 million surplus in the union's pension fund that exceeds that allowed by law. If a general strike is called the union is obliged to put the matter to a vote by its members and must give seven days notice. The last general strike at the MUCTC was in 1987 when bus drivers walked out for 27 days.



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