Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 August 2000

Uruguayan truckers break truce

On August 16, independent truckers ended their truce and began a 72-hour strike in Uruguay when negotiations over government fuel subsidies fell apart. The strike, which affected fuel and milk deliveries, concerned the high costs of operations compared to other countries: 10 times higher than in Paraguay, five times higher than in Chile, three times higher than in Brazil, and one and a half times higher than in Argentina.

Teachers demand changes in Uruguay

On August 8, teachers demanded that Uruguayan President Jorge Batle increase the education budget, giving the government a 24-hour ultimatum to respond.

Less than three weeks before the presentation of a five-year fiscal budget, the Uruguayan Teachers Federation is concerned that no negotiations on public education have taken place. It accused the government of using delaying tactics to maintain an atmosphere of uncertainty.

Union leader Hector Florit said that new investments have to be made in equipment and facilities. He also demanded that wages be raised to US$800 a month, half the cost of the basic family market-basket.

“Great Labor March” in Argentina

Fifteen days after it began in the industrial city of Rosario, the “Great Labor March” reached the Argentine capital last Tuesday. Workers rallied before Congress in Buenos Aires to present a petition with over one million signatures. The petition calls for unemployment insurance of US$380 to each unemployed head of household plus a stipend of US$60 per child.

The official unemployment rate stands at 15 percent in Argentina, with four million employed only part-time or seasonally.

Mexican VW workers strike

On August 18, 15,000 Volkswagen workers at the auto complex in Puebla initiated a strike against the car maker. Another 10,000 that work in supplier firms will also be idled.

The workers, represented by the Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITSCVW), are demanding a 35 percent wage increase. The plant produces 1,540 cars a day, two-thirds of which are exported. The last strike at the plant was in 1992, which lasted 30 days and ended with the firing and replacement of 2,000 workers.

Puebla Governor Melquiades Morales Flores appealed to the union that it take into account the economic importance of the plant and soften its demands. This week Morales is scheduled to travel to Germany.

A Labor Ministry spokesperson declared the strike unusual in view of the relative labor calm that currently prevails in Mexico. He also condemned the workers' demands, saying such demands were “high for companies like VW, which, even though it is currently very profitable, cannot afford the increase.” At the same time he pointed out that VW has not budged from its original offer of 7 percent, below Mexico's 9 percent rate of inflation.

SITSCVW leaders responded that while they are flexible, they will not accept a wage increase that is lower than at other auto plants (about 18 percent). Workers declared that the company has prepared for the strike by increasing its inventories of VW Beetle, Golf and Jetta models. Even before the strike became official, company supervisors were telling workers to go home.

Hospital strikes in Colombia

Health workers at La Victoria Hospital in Bogota, Colombia struck for four days last week. They went back to work after management agreed to pay their back wages, including extra pay for Sunday work and late holiday pay.

At the Kennedy and Perseverancia Hospitals workers are in the third week of a strike. Their unions have asked the Labor Ministry to mediate a solution to their back pay and wage demands. All of these hospitals are undergoing a serious financial crisis, with expenditures exceeding income every month.

New talks in commercial actors strike

Unions representing 135,000 striking commercial actors and the advertising industry are scheduled to resume negotiations September 13 after federal mediators intervened to bring the two sides together for the first time since July 21.

The resumption of talks takes place as the new commercials are required for the opening of the fall television season, the advent of the summer Olympics and auto companies seeking to market their new line of vehicles. The advertising industry has been able to maintain production by shifting production away from its main location in Los Angeles to out-state regions and foreign countries. But some corporations require access to sport and film celebrities, who are presently honoring the actors' strike, to boost their products.

In cases such as that of golf superstar Tiger Woods, who broke ranks to shoot a commercial for General Motors, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) is threatening to put these individuals on trial.

John McGuinn, a chief negotiator for ad agencies, told *Daily Variety*, “I am hopeful about the outcome because this has gone on for so long.... I would think it would be logical to conclude this because the situation is not going to get better.”

But McGuinn has pointed out that the advertisers have not changed their original bargaining position, which aims to substitute a drastically cheaper flat-rate for the present “pay per play” formula for network television commercials, whereby actors are paid according to the number of times a commercial airs during a 13-week period.

SAG and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) launched their strike on May 1 to defend the “pay per play” formula for network TV while extending it to ads for cable and the Internet, where the industry holds sway with a flat-rate fee.

The union, unable to advance any policy against the industry's increased expansion of production outside the United States, has limited itself to militant picketing, appeals to celebrity actors and

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sports stars to honor picket lines and interim agreements with corporations.

The interim agreements, which contain the basic contract demands the unions are seeking to obtain in negotiations, allow corporations to get access to important celebrities to market their products. But recently the unions announced watered down terms for interim agreements for cable television. These could become the basis for concessions to the advertisers.

The unions' chief negotiator, John McGuire, announced last week that the unions would scrap the “pay per play” formula if the advertisers would raise their flat-rate price of $3,000 for unlimited use of a commercial during a 13-week run to $15,000. McGuire declared, “Can we find a dollar figure that would simply say, ‘Fine, you pay us enough money and we don't care what the accounting is?' I think we could, but our dollar figure is going to be so beyond what they are going to be prepared to deal with.”

Talks stall with American flight attendants and pilots

American Airlines, a subsidiary of AMR Corporation, called on the National Mediation Board to intervene in stalled contract negations with 23,000 members of its flight attendants' union. According to the company it has reached agreement with the Association of Flight Attendants on 24 of 38 contract articles, but wages and retirement issues remain in dispute.

Flight attendants at American have lost ground on wage compensation in relation to attendants at US Airways, Northwest and Continental. Last year the membership voted to reject a five-year contract that contained average pay increases of 15.9 percent.

AMR is also attempting to extract concessions from pilots at its commuter division, American Eagle. The 2,640 pilots voted down a tentative agreement that would amend their 16-year contract over the next four years by a 5-1 margin. The extended contract, ratified in 1997, prevents the pilots from striking until the year 2013.

The Air Line Pilots Association, which represents the pilots, and the company have agreed to arbitration. Each side will select five issues that will be submitted to a panel of arbitrators. Decisions by the panel will be final.

Cevin Kehm, who chairs the American Eagle pilots Master Executive Council, issued a statement hinting that it would cooperate with AMR management: “Despite the widespread disapproval, the American Eagle pilots stand ready and unified to work cooperatively with management to implement these necessary changes.”

Workers at Oshawa GM car plant call off wildcat strike

More than 750 members of Local 22 of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) staged a wildcat strike at the General Motors car plant last week over the suspension of a union official.

The work stoppage was triggered by an incident on Saturday, August 12, when union official Doug Sanders voiced his concern when he found a manager replacing a union member on the assembly line at the No. 2 car plant. “I thought it was a safety issue and I made my views known,” Sanders said. A shouting match ensued and Sanders was given a three-day suspension and ordered off the property. The following Monday evening 150 workers refused to complete their remaining four-hour night shift in protest over the suspension. By Tuesday the work stoppage had spread to the No. 1 car plant.

“Working conditions in the plant have reached a point where the level of frustration is so high that it didn't take much to have the people go out,” Sander said, adding that workers' complaints involve issues of basic human dignity. Sanders said that during the dispute he had offered on two occasions to talk to the angry workers, but was told to keep off the company property.

Auto assembler, Darryl Hooper, who complained of terrible working conditions, said, “We can't even get time off to go to the washroom anymore.”

CAW President Buzz Hargrove accused workers of overreacting. Hargrove said the workers “are out protesting I don't know what, quite frankly ... the issue they went out on was him [Sanders] and he's the only one now who is safe,” adding that workers could be suspended or discharged if they don't return to work.

Last Tuesday, GM applied for a temporary injunction to end the strike and force workers to return to work. By Wednesday, Sanders, who has since been reinstated, had managed to convince workers to call off the wildcat strike and return to work. Workers said that they were returning to work as a sign of good faith, if GM could promise that they would not receive disciplinary action, but GM has made no promises so far.

GM officials reported a loss in production of about 2,000 cars, with a retail value of about $60 million cdn.

Air Canada Pilots' Association postpones strike date

Talks between Air Canada, its pilots and federal mediator Bruce Outhouse have broken off.

The 2,200 pilots, whose two-year contract expired April 1, have been in a legal strike position since June. Although the union is required to give 72-hours notice before any strike action can take place, the Air Canada Pilots Association has agreed, after an intervention by Labour Minister Claudette Bradshaw, to put off the strike date until September 1 (the first day of the Labour Day weekend).

Raymand Hall, chairman of the association's master executive committee, said that Air Canada and the Pilots' Association are far apart on major issues, adding that the company has bargained as if it wants to force a full strike, confident that the government will react quickly with back-to-work legislation and thus enforcing a settlement on both sides.

The Federal Liberal government has had back-to-work legislation drafted for months and has prepared opposition parties for its speedy passage, with warnings of plans to use army planes if necessary to fly members of parliament to Ottawa in order take legislative action to end the strike.

The pilots say that the 14.5 percent wage increase over five years and other benefits that Air Canada are offering is not enough, adding that their salaries would still be considerably less than that of their US counterparts. Also on the agenda are the issues of extra crew on long international flights, seniority and pensions.

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