

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 October 2000

Truck operators strike in Chile

A four-day truckers strike paralyzed Chile last week. The action, which ended October 20, involved 6,000 truckers demanding a reduction in diesel fuel taxes. The effects of the strike and highway blockade began to be felt in Chile's cities as supermarkets, unable to stock their shelves, raised prices. Gasoline stations also began to run dry. Over 90 percent of Chile's products are moved by truck.

Bolivian reporters march against censorship

Bolivian newspaper reporters marched on Monday, October 23 in La Paz to protest against draft legislation to modify the Press Law of 1925. This legislation would grant the government greater powers of censorship. Reporters call this proposed law, the "gag law." Sponsors of the law denied that it would be used to censor free speech. They claim that the new legislation would merely bring the 1925 statute "up to date."

Venezuelan president to public employees: "Don't bother striking, because there will be no further wage increases"

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez warned government workers that "nothing will come from striking, because there will be no wage increases this year" beyond a 20 percent raise already approved. Chavez' statement came in the wake of threats of labor action by some of the unions. The 20 percent wage increase represents only a 5 percent raise in purchasing power since expected inflation is calculated at 15 percent this year. Chavez threatened to jail regional and local leaders that exceed their budgets.

Venezuelan subway strike over internal union dispute

Every station in the Caracas underground was closed on October 23 due to a conflict between leaders of the Caracas Metro Workers Union. Two union leaders, Fidel de la Rosa and Francisco Torrealba, claim the presidency of the union and have gone to court. After

Fidel de la Rosa called for a work stoppage to press his claim, a group of workers prevented the trains from leaving their shops. Torrealba denounced the move. Cometro, the Caracas transit agency, threatened to take the union to court if the strike is not called off.

Picket line confrontation in California warehouse strike

Anger boiled over on a picket line as Teamsters members clashed with strikebreakers at a California grocery warehouse last week. Four hundred drivers and 1,200 warehouse workers struck the Safeway Foods facility, located 65 miles east of San Francisco, on October 18. Workers are opposing low wages, intolerable working conditions and arbitrary work rules.

Summit Logistics, which operates the warehouse for Safeway, has offered workers a 4.8 percent raise in each year of a five-year contract. Workers presently earn between \$11 and \$13 an hour. Warehouse workers are demanding a reduction in production quotas. "We'd rather lose our jobs than continue to work under these conditions," Antonio Camacho told the Associated Press. "My back is hurting so bad that I'm having trouble meeting my production standards."

Drivers want to be paid by the hour as opposed to the present setup where they are paid by the delivery, a complex system that favors the company.

Strikers reacted strongly when Summit brought in strikebreakers and pickets blocked trucks from leaving the facility. Vehicles were stoned and one driver was pulled out of his truck when crossing the picket line. A security guard videotaping pickets was also injured. Teamsters Local 439 officials denounced the workers' actions.

Florida orchestra management cancels concert season, rejects further negotiations

The management for the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra rejected an appeal for further negotiations or arbitration by musicians and canceled the 2000-2001 concert season, a decision that could lead to the

shutting down of the orchestra.

Low pay received by orchestra members fueled the strike. Musicians were also angered by the Philharmonic Governing Council's plan to set up a joint committee with the union that would weigh the skills of orchestra players and rubberstamp the firings of those charged with deteriorating skills.

Orchestra musicians struck October 5, rejecting a 5 percent pay offer by the Governing Council and demanding a 32 percent raise. One study reveals the average weekly pay for 48 selected orchestras is \$1,118, far above the \$847 figure for members of the Florida Philharmonic. When management negotiators rejected orchestra proposals and simply resubmitted their original offer, orchestra members called on the Philharmonic's 130-member governing board to elect a new Governing Council.

Music director James Judd, in an attempt to solve the salary dispute, surrendered his yearly salary of \$250,000 to raise the compensation package from \$38,200 a year to \$47,300 by the end of the five-year contract. Orchestra members agreed to the wage hike and offered to return to work with the stipulation that the two sides try to resolve the peer review committee issue and some other proposals in two or three negotiating sessions and, failing that, submit the disputed points to an arbitrator. The council rejected the players' proposal and issued an October 22 deadline to accept their terms or they would begin the process of dissolving the orchestra.

One-day strike at Rhode Island hospital

Nursing assistants, food service workers and housekeepers carried out a one-day strike October 16 against the Rhode Island Hospital in Providence to demand better wages and protest mandatory overtime and health care costs.

The 1,900-member workforce voted 897 to 95 to reject hospital management's last offer of a 12 percent raise over three years and a plan to reduce mandatory overtime. Workers oppose the overtime plan, which would allow the hospital to require additional hours up to eight times a year, three times a month and once a week.

The complaints by nursing assistants over overtime and staff shortages and charges that these conditions undermine patient care caused the state's Department of Health to put monitors in the hospital during the strike.

The one-day strike came as a result of a climb-down by the Teamsters union that limited the walkout after Governor Lincoln Almond pressed the union to restrict the strike in the interests of public safety.

Toronto elementary Catholic teachers begin work-to-rule campaign

After talks broke off between the Toronto Catholic District School Board and the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers union (TECT), the union ordered its 3,800 teachers to begin a work-to-rule job action.

The teachers from the board's 177 elementary schools are fighting to get the 2 percent raise promised by the Ontario Tory government. The board has in fact received the funding but has chosen to use it to offset the 1 percent raise it had given teachers last year. TECT had rejected the board's offer to seek binding arbitration because of the board's refusal to pass on the 2 percent provincial government raise.

According to board chair Rose Andrachuk, the board has already offered teachers a 1.5 percent increase by committing \$2.1 million out of its textbook fund. "But to give them the full amount they're asking for would require a further \$1.2 million from that textbook fund and we're not prepared to do that," she said.

The concept of school boards having to dip into textbook funds to pay teachers an increase of 1 percent is just one of many examples of the effects the draconian measures the Ontario Tory government has taken in its assault on public education. The 1 percent raise teachers received last year was the first pay raise since 1992, despite a 14 percent raise in the cost of living. Tensions between both Catholic and public school teachers and the school boards have increased since Tory Premier Mike Harris took office in 1995. The struggle came to head during the two-week strike by the province's 126,000 public school teachers in November 1997, which was betrayed by the teachers unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour.



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