

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 November 2000

Unemployed protest in Argentina

In several regions of Argentina, unemployed workers have been blockading roads since October 30 to demand jobs and food. On November 3, 1,500 men and women blocked railway lines and roads into the city of La Matanza in Buenos Aires Province and rejected the government's offer of 700 jobs and 100,000 kilos of food. The following day protesters lifted the blockade in exchange for a promise of 2,000 jobs. La Matanza is one of the poorest regions of Buenos Aires.

To the south in the oil-producing province of Neuquen, unemployed protesters began blocking Route 22 on November 1. In the northwestern agricultural provinces of Salta and Tucuman, hundreds of unemployed blocked Routes 38 and 34, demanding that a program of government subsidized jobs be extended. Other protests have occurred in the provinces of Catamarca, Santa Fe and Chaco.

The De la Rúa government is committed to carrying through an IMF-dictated economic policy and virtually ignored the plight of the jobless. Unemployment is at depression levels of more than 15 percent, with more than 4 million Argentines unemployed. According to official figures, 15 million Argentines are designated as poor out of a population of 37 million.

Chilean dockworkers end strike

Six of Chile's main ports—Valparaíso, Talcahuano, Iquique, San Antonio, Talcahuano and San Vicente—reopened on midnight November 3 following a two-day strike by thousands of dockworkers. The workers demanded changes in the labor code, which would facilitate collective bargaining for all the ports. Since the military coup in 1973 that toppled the Allende government, Chilean workers have been forbidden to negotiate industry-wide contracts. Currently dockworkers are limited to eight-hour contracts, with no benefits or seniority rights.

Initially the Lagos government insisted that it would not negotiate until the dockworkers returned to their jobs. At the same time it used police repression at two of the ports to oversee the unloading of stranded ships. Lagos later let it be known that he would address the workers' concerns, and on that basis the union officials called off the strike. New negotiations are scheduled for November 6, with union leaders threatening to reinstate the strike if no agreement is reached by Wednesday.

Mexican workers repudiate union bureaucrat

Union goon squads excluded hundreds of Mexican electrician union delegates from their own congress to prevent them from voting out the current leadership. Current SUTERM President Rodriguea Alcaine (aka Guera) was re-elected by his cronies. Outside over 300 excluded delegates and their supporters chanted, "Death to Guera!" "Death to the PRI" and "Death to Charrismo,"

referring to Alcaine, to Mexico's ruling party (Party of the Institutional Revolution) and to the Mexican form of corporatism (charrismo).

Earlier in the day, Alcaine had received Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo's backing and pledged to respect the new government of President-elect Vicente Fox. "After profound thought, I feel obliged not to retire from the responsibility of working in defense of the workers' interests," said Alcaine cynically. "I am not moved in the least by an appetite for power or personal advantage." Alcaine has ruled over SUTERM for 25 years.

Mexican government employees threaten strike

A national stoppage of public employees may begin on November 8 if the government continues to refuse the payment of a six-year bonus. On October 31, 15,000 workers from 16 unions marched in defiance of their own leaders through the streets of Mexico City and 40 other municipalities. Last week federal workers in Mexico City carried out wildcat strikes. Some were angered by rumors that the bonus would be paid in government bonds.

For its part, the Mexico City municipal government has declared that there will be no six-year bonuses for municipal workers. Negotiations are taking place with transit workers on Mexico's underground trains. Transit workers are threatening a strike over the bonus together with six other municipal unions. A Mexico City government spokesman said that there would be a year-end Christmas bonus of 4500 pesos per worker (\$460, or about two months' average salary).

Uruguayan university workers, students and professors on strike

On October 31 Uruguayan university professors joined students and university workers in a strike to demand a bigger budget for education. The strikers are demanding 4.5 percent of the federal budget. Up until now a bipartisan government committee, set up to study the question, has ignored the demands which would add \$60 million to this year's budget.

Washington DC nurses launch hunger strikes

Five striking nurses launched hunger strikes during a rally November 3 to protest the refusal of Washington Hospital Center to address their demands for an end to mandatory overtime and the resolution of staffing and patient care grievances.

Over 1,200 members of the District of Columbia Nurses Association walked off the job September 20. MedStar Health Inc., which operates the 907-bed hospital, has contracted with the Denver-based US Nursing Corporation to supply 700 nurses to serve as strikebreakers.

The AFL-CIO has limited its response to the strike-breaking

operation to civil disobedience protests and filing a lawsuit alleging improper licensing of nurses who are serving as replacement workers.

Philadelphia teachers ratify new contract

Philadelphia teachers ratified a tentative agreement November 2 by a 3,822 to 641 margin, bringing the acrimonious contract struggle to a close. Barely a third of the 21,000 union members voted and, despite the large margin, there continued to be opposition to issues in the pact.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers claims it obtained beneficial contract language along with a \$1,000 bonus in the first year followed by annual raises of 6 percent in the second year and 4 percent in each of the third and fourth years of the agreement.

The union conceded an extension of the workday by 30 minutes and accepted a merit pay system along with greater authority vested in principals to administer teacher transfers.

Qwest, union agree on contract extension

Qwest Communications International announced it came to an agreement with the Communications Workers of America (CWA) to extend its present labor agreement by two years. The extension amends the old agreement, which was due to expire on August 16, 2001, by offering annual wage increases of 3.5 and 5 percent. Pensions will increase 6 percent in 2002 and another 10 percent one year later.

Qwest claims it conceded the pension issues and sought an early resolution to the contract negotiations in an effort to entice employees who are eligible to retire to stay on with the company. Some 6,000 out of 17,000 technicians fall into this category.

The contract fails to curtail overtime hours, an issue that workers struck over in 1998 when the company was called US West, which continues to be a problem. CWA officials expect ratification of the contract extension to be concluded by December 15.

United flight attendants call for wage reopener

Flight attendants at United Airlines conducted informational leafleting November 2 to call attention to their demand to reopen their contract and negotiate wage increases. The move comes in the wake of the ratification of what is called an industry-leading contract between UAL and the pilots union.

The 25,000 members of the Association of Flight Attendants are in the fifth year of a 10-year agreement. Both sides have been holding talks. The AFA set a deadline of November 4 for the company to respond with a serious proposal. The AFA issued a statement saying: "Should United fail to address flight attendant concerns by the deadline, there will be an unhappy workforce at the airline through Christmas."

Layoffs hit Massachusetts defense workers in aftermath of strike

Just weeks after the conclusion of a five-week strike, Raytheon Corporation announced it will lay off 226 workers from its manufacturing facilities in Massachusetts. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 15 called the walkout in part to oppose the erosion of jobs at the defense contractor, which has been reducing its workforce since the early 1990s.

Independent truckers in Quebec defy back-to-work legislation

Despite a court injunction by the Quebec government ordering

striking truckers at the Port of Montreal back to work, 95 percent of 300 of the newly unionized owner-operators voted to defy the government and continue their two-week wildcat. The legislation, passed on November 2, would impose fines of up to \$1,000 a day per trucker and \$7,000 a day per union official. The truckers union and the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) could see fines as high as \$125,000 per day. Moreover, truckers face the seizure of their trucks as well as being fired by their employers, a measure that is normally forbidden in the fight for unionization.

Union bureaucrats have effectively diminished the power of the strike action by convincing the truckers to respect the court injunctions and stop picketing, which would explain the absence of pickets over the past weekend. Although the Parti Quebecois government has not yet begun to enforce the fines, a special committee is compiling evidence against those who are not complying with the court injunction. Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard claims that the wildcat strike is costing the Quebec economy about \$500 million dollars a day, while thousands of containers continue to pile up at the port.

The wildcat strike involving more than 1,200 independent truck drivers began on October 22, over union recognition in their battle against exorbitant increases in fuel costs. Once seen as "contractors," a court ruling last month allowed independent truckers to be regarded as employees, thus clearing the way for unionization. But so far, only one of forty companies targeted in the strike has agreed to negotiate a union contract. Meanwhile, the CNTU and the Quebec Federation of Labour's Teamsters union have been engaged in a bitter struggle over who will represent the truckers.

Independent owner-operators have experienced a sharp decline in working conditions since the deregulation in the transport industry in 1988, which allowed companies to transfer their transport and storing costs to the independent truckers. A recent study by Como-route indicates that 32 percent of truckers are working more than 60 hours a week, and 37 percent more than 70 hours. This means most drivers are earning less than the minimum wage. Conditions reached a breaking point when truckers were hit by a 75 percent increase in fuel costs over the last year.



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