

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 November 2000

Argentine workers riot over worker's death

Anibal Veron, an unemployed truck driver and father of five, was killed in the northern Argentine City of Taragal when 500 police attacked a barricade that was blocking Highway 34 between Taragal and General Mosconi. After being hit in the face, Veron had left a trail of blood 11 meters long on the pavement.

Veron had been unemployed for 10 months and was owed eight months' back pay. He had worked for Atahualpa, a company allegedly connected with the Governor of Salta Province, Carlos Romero, a member of the Justicialista Party (Peronist).

The blockade began on November 1 in Tartagal and extended to nearby General Mosconi on November 9. The murder led to more than 1,000 workers rioting in Tarascal on Friday. Initially targeted were businesses associated with Governor Romero. Workers also burned down the police station, the electrical utility, the local newspaper and other municipal buildings. Nationally, the Transport Workers Union launched an immediate protest strike, in which 85 percent of the drivers participated. The CTA, a wing of the Argentine General Labor Federation, has called for a national strike on November 13.

Buenos Aires newspaper sacks 200

On November 6, 200 workers of the Clarin and Ole newspapers were sacked in Argentina. Among those fired were 10 union delegates. The fired workers were accused of "in-discipline," a pretext that frees management from severance pay. The workers rejected the charges and demanded to be reinstated.

Last winter (southern hemisphere) Clarin laid off a score of workers, slashing wages and lengthening the workday. The employees responded by creating an Internal Commission to negotiate with management over workers' rights. In turn, management initiated a campaign of constant threats against workers.

Mass workers' protest in Chile

At a rally of over 15,000 workers in Santiago, Arturo Martinez, the president of the Central Workers Union (CUT), denounced the effects of the global economy and called on the Chilean government to cease privatizing state corporations. "Mr. Lagos, are you with the workers or with the employers?" asked Martinez rhetorically.

The rally sought to pressure the government into allowing workers to negotiate on an industry-wide basis, a right abolished by the Pinochet regime in 1973.

"We do not approve of a state of affairs in which the right and the *Concertacion* [the Lagos' coalition] share the same outlook on so-called labor reform and economic policies, without any alternatives," Martinez charged.

Venezuelan teachers to strike

On November 14 and 15, 4,000 teachers employed by Venezuela's Education Ministry of Carabobo Province will strike. They are threatening an indefinite strike if the government does not agree to their contract demands, which includes parity with the national teachers contract.

On November 15 the educators will march in downtown Valencia, the country's second largest city, and present a petition to the province's governor.

Buffalo teachers fined for illegal strike

Teachers of the Buffalo school district are being fined four days pay for two walkouts in September stemming from a contract struggle. The fines for the 4,000 members of the Buffalo Federation of Teachers amount to \$4 million, virtually erasing the \$4.4 million financial increase provided for by the new five-year contract. Under New York state's civil service law teachers are barred from striking.

Teacher's union President Philip Rumore spent eight days in jail and was slapped with a \$1,000 fine for calling for the walkout. He has indicated that the fines will not be opposed by the union.

Guild members ratify contract at Detroit newspapers

Members of the Detroit Newspaper Guild ratified a contract Sunday covering 500 newsroom and maintenance workers who struck the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* along with 2,000 other workers in July 1995. The contract grants management its demands for the establishment of a merit pay system and a "open shop" in which union membership will be voluntary. In addition, 30 assistant directors and others in similar positions previously under the guild's jurisdiction will no longer be covered by the contract. The agreement does not grant amnesty to workers who were fired for alleged picket line misconduct.

The contract is the final product of the isolation and defeat of the strike by the newspaper unions and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The union leaders opposed any serious mobilization of the working class in Detroit and instead promoted appeals to the labor courts and a consumer boycott. In February 1997 the unions called off the strike. Since then nearly 900 out of the 2,500 original strikers remain without jobs. Last July a federal appeals court overturned an earlier ruling by the National Labor Relations Board in favor of the unions and ruled instead that the newspapers had not broken federal labor law and were not legally to blame for the strike.

In February 1999, Detroit Typographical Union Local 18 became the first union to ratify an agreement. Earlier this month the Graphic Communications International Union Local 13 N, representing press workers, ratified an agreement. Two Teamsters locals, representing 1,000 mailroom and delivery workers, have been given final contract offers but have not presented them to the membership.

Pilots union at American Airlines loses appeal to stay fine

The US 5th Circuit Court of Appeals rejected an appeal by the Allied Pilots Association (APA) to postpone the \$45.5 million fine leveled against the union for its 1999 sick-out against American Airlines that led to 6,700 flight cancellations and alleged losses of \$225 million. Paying the fine would bankrupt the APA, whose assets only total about \$38 million.

Pilots launched the sick-out in response to American's attempt to merge Reno Air, a regional air carrier whose pilots receive lower pay than APA members, into its operations at a lower pay scale without consulting the APA as its contract required. When pilots rebelled with a sick-out the courts stepped in with the mammoth fine. Under a court mandate the union could only avoid the fine by negotiating a one-year extension to their contract.

American management used the fine to leverage a sweetheart tentative deal from APA officials that avoided higher wages, such as those won by United pilots, and the right to add regional jets flown by lower-paid pilots. But rank-and-file pilots rejected the agreement and top APA union leaders resigned. They were replaced by new elections last week.

From a legal standpoint the APA is limited to either appealing to the Supreme Court, discussing with American Airlines the conditions for dropping the fine or facing bankruptcy. With the loss of the appeal the union surrendered \$20 million to American that had been set aside earlier this year.

Delta Air Lines warned its pilots' union against engaging in job actions to pressure the carrier to agree to a new contract that would rival the industry-leading agreement won by United pilots.

Senior vice president Dave Bushy charged that members of the Air Line Pilots Association have been discussing tactics such as refusing overtime, reassignments, calling in sick, slowdowns and issuing maintenance write-ups. Like other airlines, Delta has instituted cost-cutting measures that oblige pilots to accept overtime or new assignments in order to maintain the airline's schedules. Under the union's contract pilots are not required to work overtime.

Tentative pact in Washington DC nurses strike

Negotiators for Washington Hospital Center and 1,200 striking nurses reached a tentative agreement November 6 that could potentially bring the seven-week strike at the largest medical complex in the nation's capital to an end. The 14 percent raise over three years is identical to hospital management's original proposal. Nurses initially struck demanding a 20 percent increase. The DC Nurses Association, which represents the striking nurses, obtained a seat on hospital committees that affect patient care.

The contract does concede some limits on mandatory overtime, an issue that plagues understaffed nursing units across the country. The contract purports to implement a program that will relieve nurses who work during the week from putting in weekend overtime shifts. Nurses are also to have the right to refuse overtime duty because of fatigue, illness or other circumstances. Hospital President Michael Covert declared the agreement "will protect the financial and operational vitality of the Washington Hospital Center." Hospital management spared no effort to break the strike, spending \$2.5 million to bring in temporary nurses from a professional strikebreaking organization called US Nursing Corporation. Despite the hard line taken by management, a union representative declared, "we will continue to work collaboratively with them."

Flight attendants reject wage proposal at United Airlines

United Airlines, the nation's largest carrier, announced that the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) rejected a company wage offer. No job actions will be taken by the 25,000 flight attendants due to the fact that no federal mediation has taken place and neither side is legally released to carry out a strike or lockout. The contract is set to expire in 2006.

The AFA called for wage discussions midway through a 10-year contract as a result of the industry-leading contract won by United's pilots. Flight attendants asked for an increase that would put them at 5 percent above the industry's highest wage tier, a proposal rejected by United. The union rejected United's counterproposal.

The AFA now plans to oppose United's plan to purchase US Airways for \$4.3 billion unless management agrees to new wage terms. The union's scope clause specifies that all work must be performed by employees on the company's seniority list. The AFA could refuse to amend their contract to allow the merger of seniority lists between the two airlines, thereby spiking the takeover of US Airways.

Wage stalemate between machinists and United Airlines

The machinists' union at United Airlines requested the National Mediation Board (NMB) initiate a 30-day cooling-off period that would set the stage for a Christmas strike. The request came November 6 after the company and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) failed to reach an agreement covering 15,000 mechanics.

The NMB has not given any indication that talks are officially at an impasse, although the two sides remain far apart on wages. And the IAM

has hinted that the strike threat is not serious. Mediated talks are to resume in two weeks.

New York University graduate students vote to unionize

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) announced November 8 that graduate students at New York University who provide teaching assistance to professors voted 597-418 to unionize. The vote was originally taken in April but totals were not released until after an appeal by the university against the right to organize had been defeated.

University officials are now protesting the exclusion of ballots from 295 graduate students in science and business departments whose eligibility was challenged by the United Auto Workers, which is backing the unionization campaign, and the NLRB.

Universities in the past have successfully exploited the division between graduate assistants in liberal arts and those in business, science and technical fields who receive higher compensation for their campus work. At NYU liberal arts assistants might receive \$13,000 a year for their work while their counterparts in fields that lead to careers with higher compensation might receive \$20,000 or more a year for 20 hours of work a week.

Louisiana teachers consider strike after ballot amendment on wages defeated

The defeat of two Louisiana state ballot amendments that would have provided pay raises for teachers led the Louisiana Federation of Teachers to convene a meeting November 8 to consider strike action. Over 60 percent of voters rejected an increase in the state's income tax.

Montreal independent truckers denied union, face firings

Striking independent truckers at the port of Montreal have lost the latest round in their bid for union representation. The 900 drivers have continued their three-week-old strike despite back-to-work legislation and now face the possibility of losing their jobs when the strike is settled. Workers are seeking union protection in their efforts to counter soaring fuel costs and increased workloads.

In a ruling handed down last Tuesday, the Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) rejected 33 requests for accreditation from the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), which is seeking to represent the truckers through its affiliate, Syndicat National du Transport Routier (SNTR). The union has said there are still a number of applications before the board and is confident the decision will be reversed with new information they will provide.

The PQ government of Lucien Bouchard has outlawed the strike and imposed stiff penalties against the strikers in legislation two weeks ago. Employers have since threatened mass layoffs if the strike is not halted. A lawyer representing 19 of the trucking companies affected said, "We are not about to do business with criminals.... We can tell them that their services are no longer needed." The 40 companies involved in the dispute have launched a \$12 million lawsuit against the union for damages and lost revenue. The union has said that it is willing to sign a back-to-work agreement if guarantees were given that truckers would not be penalized.

Lockout continues against Hamilton teachers

Negotiations have again broken down between elementary school teachers in Hamilton, Ontario and the Hamilton-Wentworth public school board following weekend talks. The 2,300 teachers were locked out the day after their union, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), announced a plan for rotating strikes two weeks ago.

Negotiations have been ongoing since last May but have foundered on issues arising from municipal amalgamation, which has brought into conflict previously existing disparities. Teachers have been without a contract since August and have received a pay increase of only .5 percent since 1993. While they have rejected the latest wage offer of 3.74 percent, other outstanding issues include working conditions, hours of work and job security.

The school board has said that it is not able to meet the teachers'

demands without eliminating teaching positions and calls have gone out to the province to provide more money to end the dispute. School boards across the province have been pitted against teachers in contract battles over the past year arising from the Tory government's strict funding formula, which effectively cut the budgets of most boards and restricts them from operating at a deficit.



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