

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 November 2000

## Argentina on road to general strike

On November 17, the more conciliatory wing of the National Labor Federation (CGT *dialoguista*) announced it will join the general strike organized by the so-called “rebel” wing of Argentine labor against the government’s economic policies. *Dialoguista* leader Rodolfo Dael indicated the CGT would strike on November 24, 12 hours later than the strike organized by the *rebelde* factions. CGT lefts and Argentine Labor Central (CTA) called the strike last week. It is set to begin November 23 at noon.

Dael also announced another one-day protest to be held in December. This will be the third general strike since President Fernando De La Rúa took office last December. Dael condemned the harsh austerity measures proposed by the De La Rúa government, which were ordered by the International Monetary Fund as a condition for international assistance.

De la Rúa’s draconian proposals include raising the retirement age for women from 60 to 65 years. Although De La Rúa promised to defend social security during his election campaign, future annuities of the privatized social security system will be reduced.

Protests are continuing against unemployment. In the Tucuman province, more than 1,000 unemployed men and women blocked roads. In Buenos Aires, the Association of State Employees closed several roads in protest against police attacks on workers in the Salta Province, which resulted in the death of one worker. In May, the government cut wages of public employees by 12 to 15 percent.

## Argentine newspaper assaults workers

On November 12, sacked workers from the *Clarín* and *Ole* newspapers were attacked by goons in front of the offices of *Grupo Clarín*, the company that fired 200 workers two weeks earlier. According to the press office of the Christian Liberation Movement, which spread the news via the Internet, newspapers in Argentina ignored the attack. Readers of *Clarín* and *Ole* joined picketing workers throughout the week. A boycott of the two dailies is being organized.

## Bolivian hunger strike

On November 17, a second group of former La Paz municipal workers on hunger strike managed to enter La Paz City Hall following a confrontation with security guards.

Miguel Aquice, a representative of the workers, stated the measure is part of an escalation of protests demanding social benefits owed to them by the city of La Paz. The workers have set a deadline of December 19 for their demands. The city has so far rejected this timetable.

## Brazilian labor board gives workers 10 percent raise

In a surprise move, the Regional Labor Tribunal (TRT) of São Paulo approved a 10 percent raise for autoworkers that had been on strike for two days. Negotiating jointly, the auto companies offered a maximum of 6.5 percent. Several companies vowed to appeal to the Supreme Labor Tribunal (TST). Posing as friends of the consumers, the auto companies claim they will lose market positions if forced to pay.

The TRT prevented employers from discounting workers’ wages during the strike. The auto workers union, ABC Metal Workers Union (SMABC), declared the strike will continue if employers appeal to the TST. Production decreased by 20,000 vehicles as a result of the two-day stoppage. Toyota, which is not part of the negotiating cartel, accepted the

TRT decision for its 500 workers at the São Bernardo do Campo plant.

Parts manufacturers, which include 50,000 metal workers in the Central Federation of Workers (CUT), will appeal the TRT decision. CUT announced it is demanding the same raise for its 130,000 members in the machine, electrical appliance and lighting industries.

The union Forza Sindical (FS), which settled for an 8 percent raise last January, declared it will seek re-negotiation at its largest plants, such as Metal Leve, where workers have been on strike since November 17. FS represents 130,000 auto parts workers.

At 12 percent a year, inflation in Brazil is higher than the wage raise approved by the TRT.

## Santiago subway workers to strike

Santiago transit workers voted November 17 to go on strike. Workers are fighting cuts in benefits and are demanding a decent wage raise. At the same time, public employees are involved in negotiations with the government on a new contract, to be effective December 1. Central Labor Federation (CUT) officials say the current round of negotiations is the most difficult since the center *Concertación* parties took over the Chilean government.

The government is proposing increases of 3.5 percent—3 percent for anticipated inflation and 0.5 percent for productivity. Public employees argue this represents an underestimation of the true level of inflation for the year 2000, which stands at 4.6 percent.

CUT President Arturo Martínez said there is great distrust of the government of President Lagos and vast differences between the unions and the so-called socialist government.

Workers are demanding an 8.5 percent raise, which consists of an inflation adjustment of 4.6 percent, a productivity raise of 2.7 percent and an equity raise of 1.2 percent to make up for lost buying power during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship.

## Right-wing death squads responsible for workers’ executions in Colombia

On November 16, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported in Geneva that paramilitary squads linked to the Colombian Army are the main culprits in a wave of assassinations of workers in Colombia.

The ILO reached its conclusion in the wake of a study by an ILO mission in October. According to the ILO, paramilitary groups operate with clear impunity. Courts are ignored whenever they attempt to investigate killings of trade union leaders or militant workers. The wave of assassinations has particularly hit the oil port of Barranca Bermeja on the Magdalena River northeast of Bogotá.

## Mexican teachers struggle against corporatist union mafia

Members of the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), a dissident wing of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE), warned November 17 of the probability of violent confrontation at the SNTE National Congress to be held November 27-28.

The dissidents denounce the *charrista* leaders—corporatist union officials who carry out the will of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and use Mafia-like methods.

CNTE dissident leaders Victor Matias Catalan and Rosario Lopez called for an end to the selling of teaching posts and credentials. They said the price for a teaching job ranges between 20,000 and 50,000 pesos. They

also called for an end to the repression of dissident teachers within SNTE.

#### **PEMEX workers occupy plant**

More than 300 workers of the Mexican oil company PEMEX occupied the Castano plant in southern Mexico on November 14 to demand the payment of a work tax on companies to compensate for losses workers suffered in the 1999 floods. Outgoing President Ernesto Zedillo declared the tax to be paid early this year, but workers have yet to receive any money. An autonomous public agency of the Mexican Government, PEMEX is Mexico's largest enterprise. There have been repeated hints that the country's newly elected president, Vincente Fox, is prepared to begin privatizing the nationalized oil industry.

#### **Thousands of child laborers in Panama live on the street**

An article in Miami's *Nuevo Herald* reported that thousands of children in Panama endure subhuman conditions and work as laborers in sugar and coffee plantations. The article refers to a report by the Tenth Ibero-American Summit on the condition of children in Latin America, which was held in Panama. The summit, which concluded November 18, brought together the presidents of Spain and Portugal and 19 Latin American countries.

Some 11,000 children between the ages of 10 and 17 are part of Panama's labor force. Conditions are worse among members of the Ngobe Bugle Indians, where entire families live as migrant workers. They are typically forced to live under the shelter of the few trees that surround the plantations.

Although Panama's GDP exceeds \$10 billion a year—about \$5,000 per inhabitant—the bulk of the income goes to the richest 20 percent of the population. Forty percent of Panamanians live in poverty.

#### **Uruguayan strikers seize buses**

Striking transit workers in Montevideo commandeered dozens of the Cutcsa company's buses and ran free bus service on November 17. A striking transit worker said the emergency service, which picked up hundreds of stranded passengers in various parts of Montevideo, was for workers, not for “bosses or inspectors that scab on strike days.” The service began when workers leaving a union assembly at one of the terminals took the buses and began picking up passengers. Similar actions reportedly took place at other terminals.

Bus drivers in Montevideo have been carrying out partial strikes against the bus companies.

#### **Venezuelan teachers reject government offer**

On November 17, Venezuelan teachers from the city of Valencia rejected an offer from the Department of Education. They announced they would initiate strike action unless the government comes up with an acceptable offer next week.

The teachers are demanding the same wages and benefits teachers enjoy in other regions in Venezuela. A mass meeting of teachers rejected the government's offer. They also repudiated a secret deal between two unions and the government of the state of Carabobo intended to settle the conflict.

#### **United Airlines wins restraining order against mechanics' job action**

United Airlines won a court order November 17 that prevents its mechanics from carrying out a work slowdown as the Thanksgiving travel period draws near. The restraining order is the first step toward possible contempt-of-court findings and heavy fines if the court finds the mechanics staged illegal job actions.

United Airlines had charged the International Association of Machinists (IAM) with conducting a slowdown as the nation's largest airline was forced to cancel flights due to maintenance checks by its mechanics.

According to a United spokesperson, the number of maintenance-related cancellations “spiked” in recent days. United charged mechanics with barring planes from service by requesting unnecessary repairs, incorrectly alleging missing equipment and refusing to work overtime.

Throughout November, hundreds of flights have been canceled. On November 15, United reported 38 flights canceled, a figure more than

triple the expected cancellations. By late afternoon the following day, cancellations mushroomed to 78 following actions by mechanics.

United termed the mechanics “work to rule” tactic illegal, as federal law bars any job action until mediators have declared an impasse followed by a 30-day cooling-off period. The IAM replied that working to contract rules does not constitute a violation of federal law.

The contract for the 44,000 IAM members became amendable in July. Machinists want a pay raise comparable to the 24 percent increase won by United's pilots. The IAM deemed United's wage proposal “unrealistic.”

On November 18, the mechanics and other workers rejected United's offer of special holiday payments as a concession in the labor dispute. United offered two weeks of wages as a special payment in advance of a final contract agreement.

#### **Contract showdown at two Seattle newspapers**

Negotiators for the two major Seattle newspapers and the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild continue round-the-clock negotiations in an effort to reach an agreement before the strike deadline midnight November 20.

The *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, published under a joint-operating agreement, are offering 45-cent annual wage increases for five years of a six-year contract. The Newspaper Guild, which rejects anything close to the 45 cent offer, has called for annual hourly raises of \$3.05, \$1.55 and \$1.55 over three years.

The union is also seeking increases in pensions, benefits and the elimination of a two-tier pay scale that pays a lower rate to reporters and photographers based in the suburbs.

There is considerable sentiment among Guild members that they have lost ground to the two newspapers under a discretionary merit-pay system. The plan, surrendered by the union to the two papers in 1987, has basically allowed management to set wages.

The negotiations cover 760 news, advertising and circulation employees at the *Times* and over 130 news and business department workers at the *Post-Intelligencer*, where the contract expired July 22. The newspapers have declared they will maintain their operations during a strike. The *Times* is already in the process of erecting an eight-foot-high fence around its facility.

Teamsters Local 174, which represents 89 drivers who move papers from the press facilities to distribution centers and faces a February contract deadline, has said it will honor picket lines. Some 180 mailers, members of Teamsters Local 763, rejected their contract November 17. However, the union delayed setting up picket lines until midnight November 19 while mediators recalled negotiators for last-minute talks. Teamsters officials for Local 763, who also represent 600 drivers that deliver papers to newsstands and stores, have not said whether these workers will honor picket lines.

#### **Silicon Valley company guilty of paying below minimum wage**

A Cambodian immigrant won his unfair labor practices suit that charged a Silicon Valley electronics manufacturer with firing him for refusing to do piecework below the minimum wage.

Top Line Electronics forced Kamsan Mao to work at home and on a piecemeal basis after completing his eight-hour shift. He was also forced to work weekends. The company, which manufactures and repairs power supplies for Dell and Compaq, paid Mao as little as \$5 for three hours of labor. Top Line fired Mao when he complained about the practice. The final settlement by the two sides has been sealed while Top Line agreed to end its work-at-home piecemeal production.

The exploitation of workers like Mao is widely alleged in the Silicon Valley area, with reports of immigrant laborers receiving as little as a penny per component. Piecemeal work, also known as “cottage industry,” was a pervasive system of exploitation affecting men, women and children in the early period of the Industrial Revolution. It largely disappeared as a result of the struggles of the early labor and progressive movements.

### **Federal government ruling on repetitive stress**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has prepared a ruling requiring most companies to develop programs to deal with tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome injuries resulting from poorly designed work stations and extended hours of repetitive motions.

The measure, brought forward by the Clinton administration with the backing of the AFL-CIO, is estimated to cost companies about \$4.5 million. The National Association of Manufacturers and the US Chamber of Commerce stridently oppose the rule, complaining the measure will cost four times that amount.

During the 1980s, issues such as carpal tunnel and tendonitis were rated among the principal causes of widespread labor unrest in industries such as meatpacking and assembly line work. During the period, the AFL-CIO ferociously opposed workers who, like striking meatpackers at Hormel in 1985-86, waged struggles against repetitive stress injuries. Today the AFL-CIO seeks to establish legal parameters under which they can increase the number of labor-management structures, while doing little to significantly alleviate carpal tunnel and tendonitis.

OSHA estimates that 1.8 million workers are affected by repetitive stress. The present ruling will cover about 102 million workers, including those involved in industries bound up with the use of computer peripheral products where they enter data. Some 60 percent of workers in industry labor under conditions where repetitive stress injuries are not addressed.

### **Continental pilots ask for wage boost in wake of new industry standard**

Pilots at Continental Airlines are asking for a 40 percent wage increase, becoming the second pilots group to react to United Airlines pilots winning the industry's leading contract. At the end of October, following the United contract that secured its pilots first place in wage compensation, Delta Airlines conceded a 17.5 percent initial wage increase.

The president of the Independent Association of Continental Pilots (IACP) wrote in a letter to Continental that the United contract has "redefined the landscape for pilot compensation, benefits and working conditions." IACP contends that its 5,400 pilots only make 40 percent of what pilots at other airlines earn. The union wants to open talks in May 2001. The contract for Continental pilots expires July 2002.

### **Union scuttles city workers strike in Vancouver**

After seven weeks on strike, 2,800 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 15 are returning to work, having won almost nothing from a deal reached last week between their union and a government appointed mediator.

Demands by union members for the bargaining committee to resign after the last vote prompted the provincial government to intervene to settle the strike. The new contract, which was recommended by the union bargaining committee, was almost identical to a deal narrowly rejected three weeks ago by the membership. The union managed to get it passed with a signing bonus of \$500 for each of the 1,600 full-time employees.

The deal, which was accepted by 63 percent of the members, fail to address the workers' central demand to win back the four-day workweek. Having stood for more than 20 years, it was revoked last year by the city council. In return for working an extra 25 minutes a day, full-time employees will get 14 days of "flextime" vacation in addition to a 7 percent pay raise over the term of the three-year contract.



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