

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 December 2000

Argentine trade unions to protest against austerity measures

Leaders of the “official” wing of the Argentine Labor Federation (CGT) are calling for a mass demonstration on December 19 to protest the privatization of social benefits and demand the raising of the monthly minimum wage from \$200 to \$500. The “dissident” CGT declined to participate in the protest, but instead called on workers to rally during the holidays at the Plaza de Mayo Square, across from the presidential offices in downtown Buenos Aires. The latest figures show unemployment has increased to 14.7 percent, with another 170,000 workers losing their jobs since October 1999. The number of workers on short hours (less than 35 hours per week) also increased by 50,000 over the last year. The CGT said it expected 30,000 demonstrators for Tuesday's protest.

Colombian trade union leader narrowly escapes assassination

A right-wing death squad assaulted a well-known trade union leader and Communist Party member in Bogota, Colombia on December 15. Two people were killed and a bodyguard injured, when heavily armed men attacked Wilson Borja, president of the National Federation of State Workers (FENALTRASE), as he was driving to work.

Borja has been involved in talks for a negotiated settlement between the Pastrana government and left-wing guerrilla armies and has been a critic of Pastrana's economic policies. Borja sustained bullet wounds to the head, shoulder and leg, but is expected to survive. So far this year paramilitary death squads have assassinated 116 union leaders. Another 1,522 were killed between 1995 and August 2000.

Transportation workers threaten strike in Nicaragua

Passenger and cargo drivers are to begin a strike on December 18 in Nicaragua unless the government comes up with the December fuel subsidy. Last week the government had announced that the payment would be made this week. However, government officials went on vacation without acting on the subsidies, which were the result of the 1999 truckers strike. A spokesman for the bus drivers and truckers pointed out that the delay in the subsidy comes during the month in which many operating bills are due.

Bay Area health care workers strike

About 6,000 nurses and other health care workers struck 18 hospitals in California on Friday, December 15 to demand the hiring of more nurses and support staff and increased wages. The strike at 16 hospitals in the San Francisco Bay Area was part of a series of 24-hour walkouts by Local 399 of the nurses union. The union says that strikes at two other hospitals, owned by Catholic Healthcare West in Oxnard and Camarillo, will continue for two weeks. Management flew in 150 strikebreakers from Denver-based US Nursing Corporation and is paying them between \$35 and \$50 an hour at the Oxnard and Camarillo hospitals.

Striking nurses say the hospitals have never seriously discussed increasing staffing levels. Underscoring this fact, administrator Charles Padilla said, “I think the staffing is very appropriate. It looks to me that they are hell-bent on striking,” he said. Nurses say they are given 10 patients or more per shift and that some patients are forced to wait hours to see them.

Last unions ratify contracts at Detroit newspapers

The last two of six unions representing the 2,500 workers that struck the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* in July 1995 ratified contracts on Sunday, December 17, officially ending the five and a half year debacle overseen by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Members of Teamsters Local 372 and 2040, representing delivery and mailroom workers, narrowly accepted the three-year contracts, which, similar to agreements ratified previously by the other unions, granted management the bulk of its pre-strike demands. The workforce represented by Local 372 has been cut to 750 workers from more than 1,125 full- and part-time drivers and delivery workers before the strike. Local 2040's workforce has been cut to 350 from its pre-strike level of 800 to 1,000 workers.

Of the latter union local, only 69 workers voted Sunday, ratifying the contract by a margin of only 36 to 33. Before the vote, Al Young, president of Local 2040, endorsed management's ultimatum, telling his members “if this contract isn't ratified, there will be no grievance procedure and no seniority layoffs. They will lay off whoever they want, whenever they want.”

The defeat of the strike was the product of the treachery of

the union bureaucracy, particularly AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and Teamsters presidents Ron Carey and James P. Hoffa, which blocked any genuine mobilization of the working class in Detroit to defend the newspaper workers. Instead they claimed that a consumer boycott would be sufficient to defeat the newspapers, which are owned by the media conglomerates Gannett and Knight-Ridder. The strike was called off in February 1997, when the six unions made unconditional offers to return to work, leaving hundreds of workers without jobs. Officials from the six Detroit unions are scheduled to meet with management Monday or Tuesday to end the advertising and circulation boycott.

Seattle newspapers strike continues

The nearly month-long strike by 1,059 members of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild against Seattle's two major dailies is continuing after talks broke down last week. Workers at the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* walked out November 21 in a dispute over wage and benefit issues, especially for lower-paid members working in advertising and circulation. Despite the fact that a consumer boycott campaign has proven to be worthless in other newspaper strikes, most recently in Detroit, union officials in Seattle are proposing the same tactic.

Etown.com workers to vote on union

Workers at etown.com, an Internet company that provides of online reviews of consumer electronics, are to vote on January 12 whether to make it the first unionized dot.com. The vote is being closely watched by other Internet companies, including Seattle-based Amazon.com. As dot.com companies have resorted to cost-cutting, eliminating thousands of jobs, many workers who previously may have considered themselves entrepreneurs capable of living off their stock options are now looking to address concerns over pay, promotions and job security.

"No matter what, there's going to be a showdown," said Chase Rummonds, 31, a former customer service representative at etown.com, who was one of two employees fired in October after workers staged a sick-out. At least two other workers were fired or laid off after union activities, according to officials from the Northern California Media Workers Local 39521, which filed an unfair labor practices complaint over the firing of Rummonds and the other workers.

Five-month strike at Sudbury nickel mine continues

The nearly five-month walkout by 1,260 production and maintenance workers in Sudbury, Ontario, is continuing against the giant nickel producer, Falconbridge Ltd. After months of management provocation and open efforts to smash the union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 598, has done little more than organize a few token protests and appeals to the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

From the outset it was clear that the company, which has been posting record profits, was preparing for a major confrontation. By introducing scab labor since the beginning of the strike and using stockpiled ore from a Quebec mine, the company claims to have continued production levels of up to 60 percent throughout the strike. Falconbridge has benefited from the anti-union laws that have been introduced by the provincial Tory government. Those measures, which reversed existing anti-scab laws, are being supplemented by new legislation which will make it more difficult to organize and easier to decertify unions.

New Brunswick doctors launch strike action

In the ongoing battle by doctors across Canada against the erosion of publicly funded health care, doctors in the Maritime province of New Brunswick embarked on a campaign in November of rotating strikes over low wages and poor working conditions.

In the latest action, family doctors in the provincial capital of Fredericton closed their offices December 13 and 14 and staged a protest at Conservative Premier Bernard Lord's office and at the provincial legislature. The doctors have said that the fact that their wages are among the lowest in the country is the reason why there are not enough doctors in the province to fill demand. The New Brunswick Medical Association says that more than 36,000 adults in the province have no doctor and that the situation will only get worse.

The Tory government has blamed the crisis on cuts in transfer payments by the federal Liberals, but says it is working to negotiate a better deal with New Brunswick doctors. This dispute is paralleled by actions against the Tory government of Ralph Klein in Alberta, where doctors launched a 10-day action to fight government erosion of health care in that province. At the same time, the New Brunswick government is facing a legal battle over its cuts to publicly funded abortion clinics, measures which are seen to contravene the Canada Health Act.



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