

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 February 2001

Argentine workers to strike on March 1

The Argentine General Labor Confederation (CGT) confirmed last week its call for a 48-hour general strike and mass mobilization to take place on March 1.

Rodolfo Daer, leader of the conciliationist wing of the CGT, declared that the CGT is calling for greater equity in the government's economic plan. In friendly talks with the Labor Ministry, Daer proposed that all tax loopholes to capital gains be closed and that Argentina's Value Added Tax be lowered by 6 points, to 15 percent.

The friendly state of negotiations with the De La Rúa government aside, Daer insisted that the general strike will take place as scheduled. A march on Congress is planned for March 1 and a national strike planned for the following day.

The purpose of the mobilization is to present a petition to congress with a million signatures demanding that the minimum wage be raised to \$500 a month, and that there be a family subsidy of \$250 a month. The unions also oppose the ongoing privatization of social services.

Mexican workers fired for supporting independent union

The Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR) reports that 20 workers at the Mexican maquiladora Duro Bag Manufacturing in Rio Bravo, Mexico were fired for supporting a union independent of the official labor federation.

Duro workers had been waiting on the outcome of a union recognition petition for the Duro Workers Union before Mexico's Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board.

On January 26 the National Paperworkers Union (part of the official Mexican Labor Confederation—CTM) met with the workers and threatened to have supporters of the independent organization fired, claiming that it was a foreign union formed with the purpose of taking the work to the United States. The Paperworkers currently represent the Duro workers and have signed a series of sweetheart deals with the union. Shortly after the assembly, 20 union supporters were fired.

Teachers strike in Venezuela

Venezuelan teachers carried out a 24-hour strike on January 31 to protest violations of their contract by the Ministry of Education. The national strike involved 246,000 teachers and affected 7 million students, according to the leaders of the teachers union (Fetraensenanza).

According to Omar Escalante, a Fetraensenanza leader, the strike was provoked by the refusal of the Education Ministry to carry out contract agreements that would raise teachers' wages

to the level of university professors. Professors currently earn about \$1,100 a month, while teachers earn \$714.

Escalante also indicated that the ministry has canceled medical and life insurance for teachers.

Report describes tense labor situation in Venezuela

At a roundtable discussion organized by private industry last week, Oscar Meza, director of Venezuela's Center of Labor Statistics (CENDA), raised the alarm about labor tensions that could lead to a social explosion.

"High levels of unemployment and a big informal sector, plus continuing sackings, high prices and crime rates, paint a picture of social decomposition," said Meza.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had promised 500,000 new jobs in three months last October. As Chavez recently admitted, this did not materialize, nor did other government proposals, such as promised housing construction and social security reform.

Brazilian truck drivers strike

Striking truckers in the Brazilian State of Parana temporarily suspended their strike after receiving an appeal from the Transportation Ministry to negotiate a resolution to the dispute, which began on January 28. A meeting between the truckers and the ministry was scheduled for Tuesday in Brasilia.

The strike over excessive toll charges has been marked by episodes of violence. On February 2 a trucker was shot and killed in Rio Grande do Sul.

The strike has begun to affect deliveries of food to the city of Belem, in the northern state of Para, since many of the deliveries of fruit and grain, shoes, powdered milk and other commodities originate in the southern states of Parana, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul.

Slowdown at Chrysler in Campo Largo, Brazil

Brazilian workers are carrying out a slowdown at the Chrysler plant in Camp Largo in Parana state. The strike began on January 29 in an attempt to pressure Chrysler not to lay off 250 workers at the plant. The company had promised that a new model would be assembled at the facility after announcing the suspension of production of the Dakota pickup truck.

Paulo Pereira da Silva, president of *Forza Sindical*, has been meeting with Labor Minister Francisco Dornelles in an effort to resolve the impasse.

Brazilian dock workers on strike

The 3,500 dockworkers of the Port of Santos in Brazil, the largest port in Latin America, carried out a 24-hour slowdown

on January 29. On that day only 8 of 16 ships waiting to be unloaded were being worked on, including 4 grain ships that are unloaded without the help of dockworkers. The other four were being unloaded in a dock belonging to Cosipa, a private Sao Paulo steel firm independent of COSEDSP (the Port of Sao Paulo).

The dockworkers want to pressure COSEDSP management into granting pay increases of 4.5 percent and 3 percent, retroactive to 1998 and 1999. The raises had been granted by the Regional Labor Tribunal.

Northwest Airlines mechanics may strike

Northwest Airlines aircraft mechanics union officials stated on Friday that they expect the National Mediation Board (NMB) to declare an impasse in negotiations soon, allowing the union to begin a 30-day countdown towards a possible strike. The 10,000 members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association have been working without a contract since the old agreement expired in October 1996.

Under the Railway Labor Act, unions in the mass transportation industry cannot call a strike or job related action unless it is agreed to by the NMB. Under the law, the US president can halt a strike by calling a 60-day cooling-off period.

The last agreement between mechanics and Northwest, the nation's fourth largest air carrier, took place in 1993 when the union agreed to massive concessions to save the airline from bankruptcy. Since 1994 Northwest has made nearly \$2.4 billion in profits.

Hollywood screenwriters continue talks

On Monday, February 5, negotiators for the Writers Guild of America continued talks with producers on a new three-year labor contract that has been widely expected to bring television and film production to a halt. The union, representing 14,000 members nationwide, stated that negotiations would continue on a day-to-day basis depending on the progress of the talks. Negotiations have continued beyond the two-week deadline set by the union when it began discussions on January 22.

The writers are demanding higher residual fees for sales of home videos and DVDs, and higher royalties for television programs aired on cable and in foreign markets. Another contentious issue is the expansion of creative rights, including bigger access to filmmaking sets and more say in the overall filmmaking process.

Hospital workers in San Francisco continue rotating strikes

More than 700 members of the Health Care Workers Union Local 250 in San Francisco carried out a three-day strike at three locations of the California Pacific Medical Center as part of a series of rotating strikes to win better conditions.

The union, a section of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), called their sixth job action in the dispute with local hospitals throughout the region. Originally the strike was to involve three hospitals owned by Catholic Healthcare West,

but marathon negotiations encouraged the union to delay strikes at the Catholic hospitals.

Last December 14 more than 5,000 union workers walked off the job for one day at 16 area hospitals. The union has stated the dispute is not over wages, but over demands by workers for more input on staffing issues. The union's members include licensed vocational nurses, radiology technicians, aides, clerks and other hospital workers.

Montreal arts center strike interrupted

The 19-month-old strike by 150 technicians at the Place des Arts complex in Montreal may be coming to an end as a result of an intervention by outgoing Premier Lucien Bouchard last week. Following a court ruling which prevented the company from using replacement workers, the premier appealed to the employer to postpone what would be their fourth appeal of such a decision and to agree to mediated talks.

Some of the workers—which include stagehands, carpenters and sound and light technicians, members of Local 56 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE)—have returned to work for the 30-day cooling-off period for the first time since the strike began. The last contract expired in February of 1999 and the union is seeking a standard wage increase of 2.5 percent that has been given to other public sector employees. Place des Arts negotiators have offered 1 and 2 percent increases over the term of a three-year contract and have at the same time spent over \$400,000 on legal fees in attempts to replace the strikers with nonunion workers. In response to the appeal by Bouchard they have agreed to postpone any further legal action until mediation ends.

New Brunswick stenographers strike goes to arbitration

A strike by 65 court stenographers in New Brunswick, who have been off the job since September, has gone to binding arbitration following a vote last week. This means that the strike against the Tory provincial government will effectively be ended, although it is not clear when the stenographers will return to work.

Court stenographers, who make an average wage of \$29,000 a year, have been demanding an increase of 19 percent over three years. To date, the province has offered only 1.5 percent. The decision to send the dispute to arbitration ends what has been the longest ever public sector strike in New Brunswick.



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