

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 February 2001

Transport workers strike in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

On February 9 a strike of transit workers began in this mining capital, virtually shutting down all production and affecting some 2.5 million daily riders. The strike has been so effective that it has raised suspicions that bus company bosses may be endorsing the strike as a way of pressuring the government to crack down on unlicensed operators.

However, on Saturday the Municipal Transport and Transit Company of Belo Horizonte (BHTRans) began to recruit replacement truck drivers and bus operators in an effort to break the strike. Reports state that long lines of unemployed workers have been forming in every location that has been accepting applications.

There is little indication that the strike will end soon. The regional labor tribunal has ordered a return to work by at least half of the workforce and is threatening heavy fines against those who continue to strike.

Secondary school teachers strike in Honduras

On February 7, 16,000 high school teachers went on strike in Tegucigalpa, demanding once again that the government pay them their wages. The strike by members of the College of Middle Education Professors (COPEMH) affects 800 schools and 250,000 students.

COPEMH President Coritza Diaz said, "We are striking because the government has not yet paid back wages to all our colleagues." Diaz said the union "would stop at nothing to combat the government's negligence in the payment of wages."

Finance Minister Gabriela Nunez's justification was that the government delay was due to problems in processing a 20 percent wage increase. However, in the last five years teachers have held as many as 20 strikes in Honduras, primarily over wages. Throughout the country the average school teacher earns only \$200 a month.

Amazon.com workers strike to protest layoffs

Close to 50 Amazon.com workers walked off their jobs for 15 minutes last week to protest the severance package offered by the company. "This is the first time Amazon has ever had a walkout," said union organizer Marcus

Courtney. "This is pretty significant labor action at the company."

Amazon has already notified 1,300 workers—15 percent of the workforce—that they will lose their jobs by May. The protest was staged at the Seattle, Washington customer service center that is scheduled to close in March.

The center was also the primary location for the union organizing drive by the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (Wash Tech). Before the company announced plans to close the center, union organizers said they were close to collecting signatures from more than 25 percent of the 400 employees at the facility.

Workers involved in the walkout and as well as other Amazon employees are opposed to the severance proposal and so far have refused to sign the agreement. The Amazon package offers a standard two-week severance pay, one share of company stock, and a bonus if the workers sign a separation agreement by February 9 that denies workers the right to sue the company for sexual harassment or racial discrimination.

Writers Guild talks continue as union files complaint against stockpiling

Officials of the 11,000-member Writers Guild of America (WGA) have continued talks beyond the two-week limit they had imposed on the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers, stating little except that contract talks are continuing on a day-to-day basis. There had been speculation that the union would end contract discussions on February 5, to be resumed one month before the contract expires on May 1. In 1988 a strike lasted five months, delaying the fall television season.

Instead of ending talks, the union filed complaints against several production companies for refusing to disclose information on whether or not it has stockpiled story scripts to lessen the impact of a strike. The complaint, filed with the National Labor Relations Board, accuses the NBC network, Universal Studios, Studios USA Television, USA Development and USA Pictures Development of refusing to disclose information required

under bargaining regulations.

The Guild is demanding increased television and movie residual payments, as well as a “creative rights” provision that will acknowledge writers and give them more say in film projects.

Railroad company sued for using genetic information to discriminate against workers

In the first lawsuit of its kind, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), an agency of the federal government created by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, sued Burlington Santa Fe Railroad for violating the civil rights of its employees by illicitly probing the DNA of workers who complained of carpal tunnel syndrome.

The suit charges the company required a blood test for anyone who complained of hand injuries. Unbeknownst to the employees, however, the samples were then tested for Chromosome 17 deletion, which suggests a predisposition to some forms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

“As science and technology advance, we must be vigilant and ensure that these new developments are not used in a manner that violates workers rights,” stated EEOC Chairwoman Ida L. Castro. The commission charged the company tests violate the Americans with Disabilities Act, and that the tests are “an invasion of privacy and a person's bodily integrity.”

According to the National Academy of Sciences, the most common workplace injuries are those related to repetitive hand motions. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration says 1.8 million US workers each year suffer from some form of motion-related injury.

Strike looms at Petro-Canada

Petro-Canada, the giant oil company which is still partially government owned, may be facing its first-ever strike after the deadline for a new contract settlement was passed last Thursday. About a quarter of the company's employees, or 1,100 workers, at plants across the country have been in a strike position since February 1 and negotiations have continued since that time.

The company, which posted record profits of \$893 million last year, says it has been training replacement staff in anticipation of a possible strike. The Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union (CEP), representing workers at 11 facilities across the country—including refineries, terminals and gas plants—have said they are seeking a share in the company's windfall profits as well as other improvements.

Petro-Canada Ltd. was created by the federal government in 1975 during the energy crisis, but over the last decade has largely sold to the private sector. With

soaring share prices there are indications that the government plans to sell off the 18 percent of the company it still owns.

Manitoba firefighters fight for cancer compensation

The provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Gary Doer is considering compensating firefighters in this prairie province who have developed cancer and other health problems, marking a breakthrough in a battle that has been waged for over a decade. The decision comes following the review of at least 10 studies linking some forms of cancer with fighting fires.

Since 1989, when the City of Winnipeg took a decision to cease compensation to firefighters on the grounds that it was too expensive, a legal battle has been fought over the issue with the courts eventually ruling that protection needed to be enshrined in law. Over that period at least 20 firefighters in Manitoba have died of cancer, and the vast majority of these deaths have been linked to exposure to toxic chemicals on the job.

A spokesman for the United Firefighters of Winnipeg has reported that meetings with Labour Minister Becky Barret have yielded long awaited promises that the government would bring in legislation to compensate firefighters for such job-related illnesses. Ontario is the only other province that recognizes the link between diseases such as lymphatic or brain cancer and fighting fires and provides coverage under workers' compensation.



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