

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 February 2001

Argentine government calls on unions to cancel general strike call

Argentine Labor Minister Patricia Bullrich declared that the conservative wing of the General Labor Confederation (CGT) may call off its general strike action planned for March 1 and 2. There is growing anger in the working class over the worsening economic situation and the IMF-backed policies being instituted by the De la Rúa government. One of the issues of the strike had been a CGT demand that it be consulted in the economic policies of the government. Negotiations are currently taking place between government authorities, business representatives and CGT leader Rodolfo Daer.

Brazilian transit workers threaten second strike

Bus service was interrupted on February 22 in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte and workers were meeting to decide whether or not to launch a new strike, the second this month. Two weeks before, a transit strike resulted in the total shutdown of Belo Horizonte's transit network. Among the drivers' demands are a 40-minute reduction of daily working hours, and a wage increase of 107 percent to compensate for a two-year drop in purchasing power due to inflation.

Dominican educators mobilize

The Dominican Association of Professors (ADP) has said it is considering national demonstrations and possible strikes to demand government authorities address low wages and the various issues that affect teachers in the cities of Mao, Bayaguana, Hato Mayor, San Juan, Tamayo and Santo Domingo. Teachers are demanding 5,000 pesos a month and an end to the victimization of school principals and demotions of school technicians, and the resolution of other grievances.

In Santo Domingo on February 23 hundreds of education workers marched on district offices to demand the rehiring of fired educators and a 100

percent wage increase. ADP leader Wilgton Contreras declared that the Dominican President Hipolito Mejia had to understand that the 100 percent wage increase "is a necessity, not a privilege. Inflation has eaten away teachers' wages," he declared.

Venezuelan government intervenes in oil workers dispute

With the purpose of preventing a strike in Venezuela—the world's third largest exporter of petroleum—the National Assembly stepped into a dispute between the oil union and the Venezuelan National Oil Company (PDVSA) last week. The oil workers union threatened to strike PDVSA for failing to fulfill past promises to raise wages throughout the industry. The PDVSA has a contingency plan to replace unionized workers with nonunion personnel in the event of a strike.

American Airlines attendants authorize strike

American Airlines flight attendants voted overwhelmingly February 23 to authorize a strike if no resolution is reached in contract talks that have dragged on for more than two years, the union says. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) said 96 percent of nearly 18,000 ballots received from its 23,000 members, the highest turnout in union history, were in favor of allowing union leaders to call for a strike.

Federal airline labor laws prevent the union from calling a strike until the National Mediation Board determines there is a stalemate and releases them from mediation. A 30-day "cooling off" period follows before the union can strike. The APFA has asked to be released from mediation, but the National Mediation Board has scheduled renewed talks for March 2-3 in Chicago, and for March 12-14 in Washington DC. American and the APFA have not negotiated since December.

"The gap that remains is significant.... The issues that remain are pay issues, retirement issues, and scheduling

issues," APFA President John Ward said at a press conference to announce the strike vote. He denied reports that most pay issues had been settled.

American's conflict comes as possible strikes loom at United, Delta and Northwest Airlines. Workers are anxious to recover wage and benefit concessions granted to the airlines in the early 1990s.

Comair pilots reject arbitration

Pilots at Comair, a subsidiary of Delta Airlines, rejected an offer of arbitration by the National Mediation Board on February 23 and are setting up a strike center near the airline's hub at the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport. The 30-day "cooling off" period mandated by federal law is under way and the union said it could begin a strike March 26.

The 1,350 Comair pilots, represented by the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), voted in July to give negotiators authority to call a strike if a suitable contract was not reached. The parties have been negotiating a new contract since June 1998, and have been in mediation since July 1999. Union officials say disputed issues include pay, benefits, working conditions, a retirement plan and "numerous quality of life issues."

Union Pacific, locomotive engineers settle dispute

Union Pacific Railroad reached an agreement February 23 with its 8,000 locomotive engineers over a disputed personal leave policy that led to a strike last month and halted traffic on the nation's largest railroad for hours. Other terms of the agreement with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers were not disclosed.

The railroad's engineers abruptly abandoned their jobs January 26 in protest over recent changes to work rules that ended some personal leave for many workers. Within hours of the strike beginning, a federal judge in Omaha ordered the engineers back to work.

The railroad had announced in December that it planned to cut 2,000 jobs by the end of February because of a slowing economy and high fuel prices.

Transit workers strike Calgary

Over 2,000 members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) went on strike last Thursday in a contract dispute in Alberta's largest urban center. Striking workers include bus drivers and light rail drivers in this city of just under a million people, which has the

highest vehicle per capita ratio of any Canadian city.

One of the main issues centers on wages paid to regular bus drivers and the lower pay scale for drivers of the new smaller shuttle buses, which serve the outlying areas. While the union has allowed for a wage disparity of over \$7.00 an hour, they are asking that the higher paid workers be allowed to man the shuttles. Other differences in the dispute are over seniority, contracting out work and pay equity. The city is offering a wage increase of 9.5 percent over three years and the ATU is seeking 12.4 percent.

While the provincial Tory government has pledged not to introduce back-to-work legislation, the city is seeking an injunction to force other unionized workers who are refusing to cross picket lines to stay on the job. Dean McKerness, president of ATU Local 583, did not attend a scheduled meeting with city officials Saturday morning, saying there has been no movement on critical issues. The union has said the strike could last up to three months.

Toronto teachers end work-to-rule

The job action undertaken by 11,000 Toronto public elementary teachers on January 17 has been called off with the acceptance of a new contract which provides for a wage increase of 8 percent to be implemented over two years. Teachers had been protesting stalled negotiations, which had left them without a contract since last August.

What was called a limited strike only allowed teachers to withdraw from extracurricular activities, administrative paperwork and replacement duties while all regular teaching duties continued. This nevertheless brings to an end one of the largest actions taken by teachers this school year in their ongoing battle against the Ontario Tory cuts embodied in a new funding formula. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) President Phyllis Benedict hailed the agreement, saying, "We are pleased at resolving this."



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