

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 March 2001

Argentine workers to strike

A section of Argentina's General Confederation of Labor (CGT) led by truck drivers leader Hugo Moyano declared last week that they will call for a mass mobilization and general strike. The Moyano group declared that a date for the strike would be set once the new package of economic measures is made known by the new economics minister, Ricardo Lopez Murphy.

The Moyano faction will also participate in mobilizations on March 24 set to repudiate the military coup that took place 25 years ago.

The central committee of the official CGT also met last week. It appealed to the country's Peronist leaders to prevent any more austerity measures, warning that otherwise a social explosion would be inevitable. The central committee decided to organize a rally on March 22 in memory of the union militants assassinated by the past military regime.

Murphy was appointed by President De la Rúa under pressure by the International Monetary Fund and the country's bankers. He has pledged to continue the tough deficit reducing measures imposed by the IMF on the Argentine government.

The third Argentine labor federation, the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), is also discussing mobilizations against the government's economic measures.

Bolivian workers to march on La Paz

Bolivian workers plan to march from Cochabamba to La Paz on March 20 in a protest to defend trade union rights. The cities are located 420 kilometers apart. Luis Choquetijlla, secretary of the Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) in Cochabamba, indicated that the march would take some 20 days.

Choquetijlla said that the march would be supported by mobilizations in the cities and barricades across rural highways. Workers from Oruro and Potosi are set to join those in Cochabamba for the march.

Brazilian communication workers protest

Members of the Union of Telecommunications Workers (SINTTEL) in the city of Bahia denounced the chaotic state of communications in the region at a rally in Bahia's Praia de Piedade. They accuse the communications company Telemar of having caused the collapse of services by laying off 2,500

employees of the state-owned Telebahia company when the latter was privatized in 1998.

Paraguay labor and peasant organizations plan wide-scale protests

Paraguayan unions, rural and political organizations are preparing protest marches against the government of President Luis Gonzales Macchi. On March 12 the main labor organizations are to meet to set the start of a general strike against Macchi's economic measures. They are demanding a 20 percent increase in the nation's minimum wage.

Thousands of supporters of the National Peasant Federation (FNC) will march on Wednesday through Asuncion in the eighth annual peasant mobilization. According to an FNC press release the peasants are demanding land, the technological transformation of agriculture and the industrialization of cotton production.

Transport workers, members of one of the strongest unions in Paraguay, are set to ratify a general strike on March 16 to force employers to obey workers' rights. On March 26 the unions and peasant organizations plan a great march demanding agrarian reforms, wage increases and an end to corruption in the Gonzalez Macchi regime.

Workers overcome by toxic fumes at Illinois factory

Fifteen workers at Methode Electronics Inc. in the Chicago suburb of Harwood Heights, Illinois were hospitalized March 8 after being overcome by fumes. Firefighters and paramedics were called to the factory at 1:30 p.m. after workers reported vomiting and difficulty breathing.

One worker was admitted to Resurrection Medical Center in Chicago in critical condition. The worker's condition was later upgraded to fair. Fire officials said that toxic fumes of some kind caused the illnesses. An investigation is under way to determine the cause of the fumes. The Methode Electronics factory employs 60 workers.

Writers Guild threatens strike

Leaders of the Writers Guild of America warned that its membership is ready to strike if Hollywood film and television producers continue to take a hard line in contract negotiations.

The announcement followed a March 6 meeting of 1,000 screenwriters at guild headquarters in Los Angeles. Contract

negotiations between the guild and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers have broken down over the issue residuals—payments that writers receive when their work is rerun. No new talks are scheduled.

The contract covering 11,000 screenwriters across the US expires May 2. The amount of extra money demanded by the union is relatively small, representing an average 2.6 percent increase in the writing budget for the studios.

Entertainment executives justify their intransigence by pointing to their allegedly thin profit margins, which they claim would be threatened by the guild's proposal. Producers also cite fears that pay increases surrendered to screenwriters would set a precedent for contracts with the Screen Actors Guild and other studio unions.

***Seattle Times* workers protest**

About 100 former strikers and supporters rallied in front of the offices of the *Seattle Times* on March 8 to demand reinstatement to their jobs. Officials of the Newspaper Guild say that management has reneged on a promise it made to the union by giving bargaining unit jobs to strikebreakers.

Workers at the *Times* and the *Seattle-Post Intelligencer* walked out last November over wages and benefits. Management resumed publication with strikebreakers. In January the newspaper unions ended the walkout on terms largely dictated by management. As a result of the settlement many former strikers took early retirement or quit their jobs.

Ninety-six Newspaper Guild members in the news, advertising and circulation departments at the *Times* have yet to be called back. Another 22 composing room workers are also still out of work.

United Farm Workers contract includes productivity deal

A new contract signed by the United Farm Workers (UFW) covering strawberry workers in Ventura County, California contains a clause tying worker bonuses to productivity, a first for the industry. "If they can be more efficient, we think there will be tremendous savings," gloated Mark Gladstone, chairman of Coastal Berry Co., one of the largest US strawberry growers.

The agreement, covering some 750 workers, is the first contract secured by the UFW in a nearly four-year campaign, launched in 1997 by the AFL-CIO amid much fanfare, to organize the state's 20,000 strawberry pickers. By some estimates the organizing effort has cost \$90,000 per month.

The UFW got the contract only because of the intervention of the California farm labor board. In 1999 a rival independent union, operating with no funds and no office, handily beat the UFW in a union representation election at Coastal Berry. However the UFW appealed to the labor

board, which decided to split the bargaining unit into two sections, awarding the southern California unit to the UFW.

McMaster University seeks injunction against strike

A strike by support staff at this Hamilton university, west of Toronto, Ontario, entered its second week last Friday, the day management made an appeal to a superior court to limit the number of strikers allowed to picket at school entrances.

The 1,650 university staff members, which include library assistants, clerical workers, laboratory technicians, and researchers, are fighting for a first contract and have organized under the McMaster University Staff Association. The strike action at one of Ontario's largest universities was taken over issues of job security, wages and overtime. A representative for the union said that the workers involved have not had an increase in their base salary in nine years.

Striking Calgary transit workers reject contract offer

The public transit strike by over 2,000 members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) in Calgary, Alberta, which began nearly three weeks ago, is expected to continue for some time following a vote last Saturday in which workers overwhelmingly rejected the latest offer from the city.

The union has appealed to Calgary Mayor Al Duerr to accept binding arbitration to end the strike and has recommended that course to its members. Management is insisting instead that the Alberta Labour Relations Board oversee another vote, which would take at least two weeks to complete. The outstanding issue of allowing regular bus drivers to man Calgary's new shuttle buses at their regular rate continues to hamper a settlement.



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