

Workers Struggles

20 March 2001

Argentine unions to strike for 36 hours on April 5

On March 15, Ricardo Lopez Murphy, the Argentine economics minister, announced draconian budget cuts of \$2 billion this year and \$4 billion year. The largest cut will affect Argentina's teachers. In anticipation of Murphy's speech the more radical wing of the General Labor Confederation, CGT disidente, led by truck driver Hugo Moyano, called for a 36-hour general strike to take place on April 5 and 6. Argentine teachers unions announced a 48-hour national strike to begin next Tuesday.

Murphy's speech resulted in the immediate resignation of several ministers of the government coalition, including all the members of the left leaning People's Solidarity Front (FREPASO) and some of President De la Rúa's own party, the bourgeois Radical Civic Union (UCR).

Lacking sufficient support in Congress, De la Rúa is expected to impose the austerity measures by decree. The threatened general strike would be the third in Argentina since De la Rúa took office 15 months ago.

Total strike in Cochabamba

A near total shutdown of the Cochabamba region in Bolivia has opened up a new front in the struggle against President Hugo Banzer, whose resignation is being sought by social organizations representing workers and peasants. The Cochabamba Civic Committee (CCC) called the strike. It is demanding that the government repudiate its \$30 million debt with the regional water company.

Similar strikes took place last week in the cities of El Alto, near La Paz, and the Sucre, to the south.

Banzer is increasingly isolated, even from his supporters in the ruling elite. Last week business groups called for his resignation and the imposition of a "government of national salvation."

Retired Bolivian miners march on La Paz

About 3,000 retired Bolivian miners began a 200-kilometer march between Caracollo and La Paz. The senior workers are demanding that the government grant them a minimum pension of 1,000 bolivianos (Bs) a month (about 150 US dollars). The current minimum is 350 Bs.

Few of the marchers have dropped out despite heavy rains, which have slowed their trek through high altitude terrain (about 3,500 meters.) Many of the marchers use canes and walkers. Truck drivers have been stopping to feed them as they go along. In the city of Oruro, doctors mobilized to care for the health of the retirees.

In August 2000 the Banzer government promised the retirees to increase the pension to 550 Bs, but later reneged. In negotiations with the elderly workers, the government has again offered 550 Bs. This time the retirees have rejected the offer, and instead are

demanding the full 1,000 Bs.

The regime has let it be known that it is considering suppressing the march under the pretext of "protecting the lives" of the retired workers.

Speaking to the miners, Jose Luis Perez, director of pensions, claimed that the government's hands are tied because the law established a minimum of 550 Bs. However, the government did sweeten the deal by promising 700 Bs in an attempt to get them to desist from marching on La Paz. The retirees reacted violently to Perez' words. One miner asked: "What do you know about us, who have labored in the mines for over 20 years and deserve 1000 Bs pension for having generated so much wealth for the country?" Perez was physically attacked before the miners walked out en masse from the assembly.

Brazilian oil workers protest lack of safety measures

The biggest offshore oil platform in the world, P-36, exploded off the coast of Espirito Santo. Ten workers died and nine are missing. Three powerful explosions at P-36 occurred on March 15 as new equipment was being tested to increase production. The oil platform weighed 31.4 tons and had a height of 40 stories.

Petrobras workers in Espirito Santo carried out a demonstration in front of Petrobras headquarters there. Forty workers participated in the demonstration wearing black armbands in honor of their comrades. Other oil workers demonstrated in front of the Duque de Caxias refinery in Rio de Janeiro, demanding a strike. The workers indicated that safety regulations in the offshore oil rigs are very weak.

Oil Workers Union leader Eneas Zanolatto declared that the union is consulting with the leadership in Rio de Janeiro to inform the union of the causes of the tragedy and to make a decision on strike action.

Chilean workers protest against the Inter-American Development Bank

Teachers, transit employees and workers in the textile, construction, forestry and metalworking industries joined in mass protests in Santiago against the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The president of the Regional Metropolitan Professors College, Jaime Gallardo, accuses the IDB of promoting an unjust economic model that "affects the working class." The professors joined thousands of other workers, members of the United Workers Central (CUT), to protest the 42nd meeting of the IDB governors.

On March 16 over 100 protesters were arrested when police stopped the demonstration in Santiago, using water cannon against the demonstrators. The Socialist Party government of President Lagos has come under criticism for the heavy handed way in which it is dealing with the protest.

Three workers die in blast at Georgia chemical plant

An explosion at the BP Amoco Polymers plant in Augusta, Georgia killed three workers March 13. The men, George Sanders, 42, John Rowland, 35, and Henrich Kohl, 25, were killed while performing routine maintenance on a chemical waste tank known as a “knockout pot.” All three were operators at the plant, which produces plastics used by the auto parts industry and hospitals.

State investigators said the head blew off a nine-foot pressure vessel after workers had loosened a few of the bolts on the head in preparation for cleaning. Plant workers told inspectors that pressure in the tank should have been zero, but “spiked” just before the attempt to unseal it.

Plant management said it would not comment on the accident until its own internal investigation is completed. The Occupational Safety and Health administration has sent three investigators to the site, but no report is expected to be filed for at least six months.

Appeals court rules against United Airlines mechanics

A three-judge panel of the 7th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled March 14 that a federal judge erred when he refused to issue an injunction against an alleged work slowdown by United Airlines mechanics. The appeals court ordered US District Judge William J. Hibbler to immediately issue an injunction against the International Association of Machinists.

United Airlines has accused the IAM of encouraging mechanics to take jets out of service unnecessarily in order to bring pressure on management during long, drawn-out contract negotiations. The airline says it has been forced to cancel an average of 45 flights a day due to maintenance problems, above the normal average of 15 to 20.

In refusing to grant United's request for an injunction last December, Judge Hibbler advised management to rely on its own internal disciplinary procedures. He noted that a previous restraining order against the IAM had not had an appreciable effect in reducing flight cancellations.

United Executive Vice President Andy Studdert hailed the appeal court ruling. “Today's decision is an important one for United's customers and sends a clear message that this company will act to protect them from illegal job actions,” he declared.

Northwest Airlines mechanics union rejects contract offer

Negotiators for the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association rejected a last-minute contract offer by Northwest Airlines, setting the stage for the intervention of the presidential emergency board appointed by George W. Bush under provisions of the Railway Labor Act. Bush issued an order March 9 blocking a strike by mechanics, cleaners and custodians at the airline. The three-member emergency board has 60 days to come up with a proposal for a settlement and airline mechanics are legally barred from striking during their deliberations.

Northwest reportedly increased its wage offer to 26 percent, up from 19 percent. It also proposed to increase the amount of money it will set aside for retroactive pay. The proposals fell far short of the union's demand, which calls for a 40 percent pay increase for senior mechanics and for full retroactive pay for the four and a half years machinists have been without a contract.

In rejecting the Northwest proposal, the union also criticized Northwest's proposal for a four-year contract rather than a three-

year agreement, management's formula for calculating overtime pay, and the company's refusal to allow workers to get credit for unused sick time at retirement.

Court ruling could provoke strike by *Toronto Star* carriers

The proposed contracting-out of newspaper delivery by the *Toronto Star* has been given a go-ahead following a court decision rejecting an injunction by the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild. The union sought to restrain the newspaper from outsourcing home delivery.

The union, which was only recently granted certification, has appealed to the Ontario Labour Relations Board alleging unfair labor practices by the *Star*. However, the guild must prove that the decision of the paper was “anti-union” to prevail.

Over 200 jobs could be affected, which the *Star* says would save the newspaper \$6 million. The deadline for a strike-lockout passed on March 17. The 2,000 members of the newly certified carriers local could be in a job action this week.

Police abuse condemned in Trent University protest

At a recent peaceful demonstration at Trent University in Peterborough, northeast of Toronto, eight female protesters were arrested and removed by local police and then strip-searched, provoking an outcry of abuse of authority by both students and faculty.

The sit-in at the school's academic offices, which began on February 26, was being staged by students to oppose the planned dissolution of two of the main downtown colleges of Trent University and against overstepping of authority by the school's board of governors and increased commercialism on campus. On March 1 at 3 a.m., 25 police officers in full riot gear moved in at the request of the administration and removed the protesters. They then strip-searched eight of the women, clearly without just cause, prompting a public denunciation of the police actions. New Democratic Leader Howard Hampton said the incident was “shocking and unnecessary” and has asked for a provincial investigation.

In a recent resolution, faculty at the school have also condemned the abuse, asking Trent University to drop charges against the eight students without the imposition of fines. In addition they have asked that no academic penalties be assessed against the protesters.



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