

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 March 2001

General strike shakes Argentina

On March 21 several union federations launched a 24-hour general strike in Argentina. The strike coincided with a 48-hour national teachers strike that had begun the day before.

The metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, home to a third of Argentina's 34 million people, was paralyzed by the total absence of bus transportation and erratic rail service. The strike also was very strong in the industrial center of Cordoba, in part because the private transit agencies decided not to attempt to run bus service in that city.

Elsewhere, the strike was not observed so completely, leading to incidents of violence. In the resort city of Mar Del Plata there were attacks on buses that were still running. Similar incidents were also reported in Bahia Blanca, Santa Cruz and Neuquen. In Parana, court workers refused to obey their union's strike call. Instead they met at work and voted out the local union leadership.

The strike was organized by the Argentine Workers Movement (MTA), the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), and by the Combative Class Current (CCC), following tough austerity proposals from the government of Fernando De la Rúa. The strike took place even though the measures, proposed by Economic Minister Lopez Murphy, had already been withdrawn and Murphy had resigned. The Workers General Confederation (CGT) did not join the work stoppage.

President De la Rúa has called for a "government of national unity" with extraordinary powers for the executive branch of the state. If De la Rúa's new economics minister, Domingo Cavallo, obtains the special powers he will in effect have carried out a civilian coup d'etat.

Government workers strike in Colombia

Seven hundred thousand Colombian government workers went on strike for 24 hours against President Andres Pastrana's economic measures. This was the seventh government strike since Pastrana took power in August 1998. The strike appears to have had a spotty impact, mostly affecting the oil sector and public education. Transportation and banking were much less affected.

The workers oppose a layoff plan to eliminate 70,000 positions from the state employment rolls. The job cuts are the result of a December 1999 agreement between the Pastrana administration and the International Monetary Fund. The workers also oppose pension reform that would increase workers' length of service and age before they are eligible for a pension.

In the oil center of Barranca Bermeja the strike began the day before as a protest against the death squads in that city. The city has been the scene of clashes between forces of the ELN (National Liberation Army) and right-wing paramilitary forces. Several union leaders have been assassinated by the paramilitaries.

The Colombian CUT (United Workers Central) also called the strike to demand a solution to the country's unemployment crisis. Unemployment in Colombia, at 20.5 percent, is one of the highest in Latin America.

Striking truck drivers block coffee port

Last week striking truck drivers blocked the port of Buenaventura, Colombia's main coffee exporting port, preventing coffee exporters from shipping their cargo.

Union leaders in Cali and Buenaventura declined to say when the strike

would be lifted. Negotiations with cargo companies are proceeding very slowly.

Maquiladora workers fight for an independent union

The Committee for Labor Rights reports that workers at the Kuk Dong factory, located in Atlixco, Mexico, met on March 18 as part of the legal process to establish their own union. Kuk Dong produces for Nike, Reebok and others apparel manufacturers, and some of its products are sold at US colleges and universities.

The drive for an independent union at Kuk Dong began in January 2001 when 800 of the factory's then 900 workers went on strike to protest the firing of five workers. Two months later, independent union supporters met and established SITEKIM (Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Empresa Kukdong International de Mexico, or the Independent Union of Workers at the Company Kukdong International of Mexico).

Kuk Dong workers have fought reprisals and outright violence, mainly at the hands of the conservative government-affiliated union, the FROC-CROC, the union from which SITEKIM is struggling to win bargaining rights.

On March 18, in an intimidating move, the FROC-CROC stationed three people with a video camera to film workers entering a meeting.

Seventy-eight government workers locals to select new chief in Mexico

The impending 19th National Congress of the National Federation of Government Workers Unions (FSTSE) is taking place midst a rebellion by 32 of its affiliated unions that are openly challenging the reelection of Joel Ayala as FSTSE leader. Were Ayala to win, he would be the first to be reelected since the federation was formed in 1938.

The FSTSE represents over 1.7 million Mexican government workers. There is general discontent in the union over Ayala's inability to deliver increases in wages and benefits for government workers.

Venezuelan oil workers threaten job actions

FEDEPETROL, Venezuela's largest oil workers union, declared March 21 that its membership is on alert to strike due to the collapse of wage negotiations with the Venezuelan National Oil Company (PDVSA). A strike by the 60,000 PDVSA workers would not immediately shut down production, since the industry is heavily automated. However, it would gradually begin shutting down Venezuela's oil exports. Venezuela is the third largest oil exporter in the world.

PDVSA management has refused to give the same wage increases granted other government workers last year by the Hugo Chavez regime. Rather than rolling the wage into base pay, PDVSA insists on granting the raise as a one-time bonus.

FEDEPETROL conducted two strikes during the last six months. In October 2000 there was a walkout during negotiations over a two-year collective bargaining agreement. At the beginning of this month, oil workers struck to defend a production bonus that PDVSA wanted to reduce.

Federal arbitration proposed in Delta Airline negotiations

Delta Airlines accepted a proposal by the National Mediation Board offering binding arbitration to settle the ongoing contract dispute with the pilots union. The Air Line Pilots Association, the union for 10,000 Delta pilots, is scheduled to meet March 29 to consider the proposal.

Delta and the pilots union have been negotiating since September 1999. Major issues are still on the table, including wages, job security and the compensation of workers at Delta-Express, a low-fare subsidiary of Delta. The pilots are attempting to recoup concessions made in 1996. Delta has posted four straight years of profits.

Under provisions of the Railway Labor Act if either side rejects binding arbitration a 30-day "cooling off" period could begin, after which the pilots would be legally free to strike. President George W. Bush has threatened to block all strikes in the airline industry this year by invoking emergency powers granted under the act.

Contract extension at Weirton Steel

The Independent Steelworkers Union has agreed to a contract extension until June 8 with Weirton Steel. The previous four-and-a-half-year agreement covering 3,100 production and 400 technical workers expired at midnight March 25.

The "worker-owned" facility located in Morgantown, West Virginia has seen extensive job cuts in recent years. Earlier this month management eliminated 70 administrative positions, slashing its white collar workforce by 10 percent.

Negotiations began in December, but only recently have turned to the issues of wages, job security, health care and pensions. In agreeing to the contract extension the union leadership cited pressure on the steel industry due to foreign competition.

UAW agrees to concessions at Michigan GM plant

United Auto Workers Local 5960 has agreed to a concessionary package at the General Motors Lake Orion, Michigan assembly plant. Management had threatened to lay off hundreds of workers at the facility that makes the Oldsmobile Aurora, Pontiac Bonneville and Buick Park Avenue and LeSabre. Sales have been falling for large-size cars.

Under terms of the agreement, which have not been made fully public, General Motors will institute a series of short plant shutdowns, rather than reduce the line speed by 25 percent, an action that would have resulted in about 850 layoffs. GM says the deal will have no impact on the company's plans to eliminate one shift at the Lake Orion plant starting in the summer of 2002.

Hollywood directors oppose screenwriters demand

The Directors Guild of America has issued a letter opposing a demand by screenwriters for greater creative control in filmmaking. The screenwriters union wants to eliminate the so called possessory credit, "A film by..." saying it relegates writers to a secondary status within the industry.

"The WGA possessory credit proposals are unacceptable," wrote Jack Shea, president of the Directors Guild of America. "The Directors Guild will not accept any provision that affects what credit a director may take."

The clash over the so-called vanity issue of film credits come as the Screen Writers Guild is set to strike Hollywood film and television studios May 2 over demands for increased compensation. The screenwriters union broke off negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers on March 1. The contract for Hollywood screen actors expires June 30.

Toronto school strike postponed by union

Saying it wanted "to give the board time to reconsider its position and come to its senses," the union for 13,000 support staff with the Toronto District School Board has postponed a threatened strike. The union was in a legal strike position as of Saturday, March 24, but now says that a strike will not be called until the end of the month.

Local 4400 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents administrative and maintenance staff at Toronto public schools, has said it will launch a work-to-rule campaign this week in advance of any all-out strike. The school board is offering wage increases of 2.4 percent in the first year and 2 percent in the second of a two-year contract, and the union, which has not seen a wage increase since 1993, is seeking

an 8 percent increase. Support workers are also seeking job protection and rules against contracting out in the event of further proposed job cuts.

While the school board has said that daycare facilities would remain open in the event of a strike, that would not be the case if a strike closed the nearly 600 schools in the Toronto Board. A union spokesman has said that there is a severe staffing shortage resulting from the province's new funding formula and that staff are no longer able to keep up with regular duties. Contract talks are continuing.

Strike at Toronto Star disrupts delivery

About 2,000 members of the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild (SONG) began rotating strikes on Tuesday, March 20 in a battle for a first contract with the *Toronto Star*, Canada's leading liberal newspaper.

The union was recently granted certification and has taken the strike action in response to a court ruling allowing the outsourcing of delivery services by the *Star*. Negotiators for the paper have said that they expect that any new contractors will continue to use the same carriers, but have offered a bonus of \$2,500 for any routes that are contracted out. The union is asking for bonuses of up to \$5,000 as well as a 15.8 percent wage increase in the first year of a contract.

About 100 union members picketed the printing plant outside Toronto over the weekend, preventing delivery of the *Star* and other papers owned by its parent company, Torstar, to some of its subscribers. No new talks were scheduled over the weekend.

Calgary transit strikers reject offer

Going into the second month of a strike, transit workers in Calgary, Alberta overwhelmingly rejected the latest offer by the city last week. This is the third time the 2,000 workers have voted on and rejected virtually the same contract since their strike began. The latest vote was held March 19 under a ruling by the Labour Relations Board.

The leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), which represents the strikers, have said the strike could be ended immediately if the city would agree to binding arbitration. Traffic in the city has been gridlocked for nearly a month, but the outstanding issue of allowing bus drivers to man the smaller shuttles remains the main obstacle to a deal.



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