# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**3 April 2001**

**Argentine union bureaucrats to support government plan**

Last week Argentine Economics Minister Domingo Cavallo obtained special powers from Congress to impose economic reforms through decree. Many political sectors have come out in support of Cavallo, and Peronist trade unionism is no exception. Cavallo's appointment and his emergency powers were given support by the CGT, the country's main labor federation.

The CGT leaders made no mention of Cavallo's anti-labor policies during the Menem government or his participation in the murderous military dictatorship 25 years ago when it announced its willingness to grant the regime a period of labor peace.

Cavallo is proposing a supply-side solution that consists in lowering costs to businesses, including labor costs, through corporate tax cuts, government subsidies, and measures that make it easier to cut wages and lay workers off.

More radical sections of the Argentine labor movement are expected to follow suit. The dissident CGT faction led by truck driver Hugo Moyano, with links to the Buenos Aires Peronist Party, canceled a strike mobilization for this week. The powerful Metal Workers Union (UOM), led by aging Lorenzo Miguel, also appears ready to suspend labor mobilizations against the De la Rua government.

In return for the betrayal of the rank-and-file trade unionists, the union leaders got some assurances that the health and welfare funds they control will receive an infusion of funds from the government. In addition there were vague promises from Cavallo that, in return for so-called labor peace and wage and employment flexibility, unemployment levels will drop.

**Bolivian unions to strike**

The Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB) has called for a national strike on April 5. Ramiro Cuentas, leader of the urban teachers union and member of the COB leadership, declared last Saturday that since the government refuses to negotiate publicly with the COB, a strike is the only alternative.

On March 30, government authorities refused to engage in a public debate on its policies. Cuentas contrasted the Banzer government's refusal to engage in a public dialog with its willingness to debate with corporate leaders and to offer them financial support to subsidize them during this period.

The April 5 strike is to last 24 hours. In addition, the COB is preparing a national mobilization for April 17 with a labor march from the mining center of Oruro to the capital city La Paz.

**More unions may join Brazilian longshoremen's strike**

Sao Paulo's port of Santos, Brazil's largest deep-water port, has been paralyzed all week by a stevedores strike that began on March 28.

On Saturday, as port operators began to move cargo without the use of the striking longshoremen, the strikers initiated mass pickets to stop them. In one case the workers were pushed away by federal and military police squads.

The stevedores union refused to obey orders from the labor tribunal (TRT) to end their strike or face punitive fines of R$50,000 per day (US$25,000). Another 10 Sao Paulo port unions may strike this week in support of the strikers.

The strike began on March 27 and has stranded 13 ships in port. Another 28 are queued up waiting for dock space. The state of Sao Paulo port agency estimates economic losses of half a million dollars so far. Shipping is being diverted to the port of Paranagua, near the southern city of Curitiba.

The strike revolves around the decision to give a labor contracting board authority to decide hiring practices. Formerly a union hiring hall was in charge of employment on the docks. Santos handled a record 43,000 tons of cargo in 2000.

**Mexican sugar mills cannot pay their workers**

On March 31, Sergio Pena, secretary of the National Confederation of Rural Proprietors (CNPR), admitted that 48 of Mexico's 62 sugar mills have suspended wage payments to their workers. The companies are negotiating with the National Bank of Foreign Trade (Bamcomext) for fresh funds. They also owe payments to retirees.

A strike of agricultural and mill workers began on March 24 to demand the back pay and the strike is now affecting the sugar harvest. This is the latest in a series of strikes that have seriously delayed sugar harvesting and production. For some mills harvesting is already 20 days behind. The current strike is affecting the processing of 11,000 tons of sugar. The union, the National Farmworkers Confederation (CNC), has also organized barricades across highways in the sugar processing regions.

**Teachers strike in the Dominican Republic**

Five thousand teachers in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, went on a 48-hour strike on March 29. They are demanding a raise in pay and in a monthly incentive stipend. At the same time, the national Dominican Association of Teachers called for a national teachers strike next week.

The strike took place shortly after it was announced that $300,000 had been embezzled from the teachers union. The funds were part of the deductions taken from teachers' wages for union-managed benefits. Leading bureaucrats have been arrested and are awaiting trial.

The teachers are demanding a 100 percent wage increase. Currently teachers earn around $303 a month.

**Caracas teachers strike**

Teachers in Caracas went on strike March 29, shutting down nearly all public schools in this city. The strike issues include wages, demands that the city stop transferring teachers indiscriminately and the rehiring of laid-off teachers.

The strike was accompanied by the occupation of the schools by the teachers. The National Executive Committee is planning a national teachers strike to take place on April 4 and 5.

**Venezuelan strike wave amidst increasing government repression**

On Friday, March 30 Venezuelan oil workers ended their two-day-old strike, pointing to the strong repression meted out by the government of President Hugo Chavez. Oil workers leader Feliz Jimenez indicated said that over 120 workers had been arbitrarily arrested during the two-day protest.

The workers began the strike to demand that the state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) grant them the 15 percent wage increase already approved for other public employees.

A company spokesperson said that only 20 percent of the 20,000 union workers actually joined the strike. The striking workers were only one part

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of the refinery's labor force. Another 20,000 workers are hired by outside contractors. Venezuelan oil workers earn about 340,000 Bs (US$480) a month.

President Chavez mobilized the National Guard to repress the strikers and confront protesting workers. The oil strike is part of a strike wave shaking Venezuela. In addition to the oil workers, Caracas's teachers and steel workers have struck. Caracas's subway workers have given the government 15 days to pay back wages owed to them.

Chavez' chief of staff, Elias Jauas, promised that the government would act â€œvery firmlyâ€• and rationally from now on against striking workers.

One hundred sixty thousand public school teachers went on a three-day strike in Caracas against violations of their collective bargaining agreement, occupying their schools. The teachers are also demanding a wage increase.

Four thousand steel workers at Siderurgica del Orinoco (SIDOR) began a strike on March 28 after rejecting the company's last wage offer.

SIDOR is the result of the privatization of the Venezuelan steel industry. A consortium of private steel producers owns 70 percent of SIDOR, making it one of the largest steel producers in the Andean region of South America.

The company had asked the union to suspend contract negotiations until the international steel market stabilizes. Its latest offer consisted mainly of attendance and other bonuses, contingent on the production of 3.4 million tons of steel.

**Comair pilots enter second week of strike**

A strike by 1,350 pilots against Comair, the second largest US regional air carrier, is entering its second week with no new negotiations scheduled. The walkout has shut down the airline and forced the cancellation of hundreds of flights. Prior to the strike, Comair operated 800 flights daily.

Comair management has called on the Air Line Pilots Association to accept a proposal by the National Mediation Board for binding arbitration to settle the dispute. Pilots have been negotiating for a new contract for the past three years.

The final offer by Comair, presented shortly before the strike began, called for the elimination of all work rules, job security provisions and other benefits. An ALPA press release denounced the proposal, calling it â€œpunitiveâ€• and â€œretaliatory.â€•

**Delta pilots reject binding arbitration**

The Air Line Pilots Association has rejected binding arbitration to resolve a contract dispute involving 10,000 pilots at Delta Air Lines. The action triggers a 30-day cooling-off period, after which the pilots would be legally free to strike.

Members of the Air Line Pilots Association at Delta have begun informational picketing at Atlanta's Hartfield International Airport and other facilities to protest lack of progress in contract negotiations. Major unresolved issues include pay, job security, retirement and pay for pilots at Delta Express, a low-fare subsidiary of Delta. Negotiations are set to resume the week of April 16.

In a memo to employees, Delta Chairman Leo Mullin talked of a possible intervention by the White House if contract negotiations fail. â€œWe are optimistic Delta will continue to provide uninterrupted air transportation to our customers,â€• he declared.

In early March, President Bush intervened to block a strike by Northwest mechanics. The administration, however, has declined to intervene in the ongoing strike by pilots at Comair, a Delta subsidiary.

**Columbia University graduate students file for union recognition**

Graduate students at Columbia University in New York City have filed with the National Labor Relations Board for permission to form a union. Organizers say they have obtained signatures from â€œa clear majorityâ€• of graduate students working as research and teaching assistants.

Should the NLRB accept the students' petition, the next step would be for the labor board to conduct a vote among all graduate students who would be covered by the proposed union.

The Columbia graduate students' organizing effort is being coordinated by the United Auto Workers union. In March, New York University agreed to bargain with the newly formed graduate students union. The successful organizing drive at NYU was the first time that graduate teaching assistants obtained union recognition at a private US university.

**Judge orders American Airlines and pilots union to settle fine**

US District Judge Joe Kendall ordered American Airlines and the Allied Pilots Association to reach a settlement by April 30 of the outstanding $45.5 million fine levied against the union for its alleged participation in a sick-out in 1999.

The fine was the largest ever levied against an American union. It represents a sum greater than the entire assets of the pilots union. Under a court order, $20 million of the union's $38 million in assets has been put into escrow.

The order by Judge Kendall came 24 hours after pilots, flight attendants and mechanics at American indicated opposition to the airline's acquisition of Trans World Airlines, which has filed for bankruptcy. American must negotiate with the pilots and other unions over the terms of the integration of the TWA workforce into the existing American workforce.

The pilots union is refusing to include the issue of the fine in negotiations over terms of possible integration of the TWA and American workforces. Last September the pilots' rank and file rejected an agreement between the APA and American to settle the fine in exchange for an extension of the union contract.

**Toronto school support staff on strike**

Following a one-week postponement by the union leadership, 13,000 support workers in the Toronto District School Board went on strike on April 1. The walkout is expected to cause the shutdown of public schools across the city.

Striking workers include caretakers, administrators, supervisors, some bus drivers as well as part-time employees. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents the strikers, are seeking an 8 percent wage increase, the amount teachers won in a recent settlement. The board is offering a total increase of only 4 percent over two years. One of the most contentious issues in the negotiations, however, is the board's plan to eliminate provisions against contracting out of some jobs, an issue which prompted a two-week strike in 1999.

**Transit strikes hit lower British Columbia**

Transit workers in the southern region of this Pacific coast province went on strike at midnight March 31 in opposition to planned service cuts. The strike brought the most populated region of British Columbia to a virtual standstill.

The more than 3,300 striking bus drivers and mechanics in the provincial capital, Victoria, as well as on the lower mainland, including Vancouver, are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and are striking for wage improvements and job security. The union is asking for an 18 percent wage increase over the term of a three-year contract and employers are offering 8 percent. Bus drivers will vote this Wednesday on an offer which the union leadership has recommended they reject.

Three hundred workers at one of the transit companies who are represented by the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) as well as security guards represented by the same union also went on strike on April 1.

The transit strike in British Columbia is only one among a number of anticipated labor disputes in April involving up to 90,000 workers in the province, including nurses, health care workers and school staff. The provincial NDP government, which is expected to announce an election in the coming weeks, has said it will not intervene in any strike actions.

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**Public sector workers strike Newfoundland**

Almost 20,000 public servants in this maritime province went on strike April 1, beginning the largest strike in the history of Newfoundland.

Facilities affected by the strike include health care, libraries, schools, liquor stores and government offices. Striking workers are represented by the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Roger Grimes, who became Liberal premier of Newfoundland in February, has said that measures have been taken to provide essential services in the event of a strike.

The principal issue in the strike is wages, with the province offering a total 13 percent increase over three years and the unions demanding 8 percent each year. A new offer has been presented to union negotiators and there is speculation that, if it is passed by the membership, the strike could be short-lived.

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