

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 May 2001

Protests escalate in Argentina

Argentine President Fernando De la Rúa denied May 18 that he would resign in the face of strikes and mass protests by unemployed workers. He described the wave of protests that accelerated last week as “serious” and called for a channel of dialog “so that I can stay informed.” Living standards for Argentine workers have deteriorated throughout a three-year recession and there appears to be no end in sight. Out of a population of 36 million, 2 million workers are listed as unemployed, about 17 percent of the labor force. Over a third of Argentines live under the official poverty level.

On May 18 thousands of unemployed protested in Buenos Aires against “hunger and economic adjustments.” Columns of protesters clogged Buenos Aires' downtown on their way to the Rose House, where De la Rúa's offices are located. The core of the protest consisted of 2,000 unemployed workers who had marched 45 kilometers into the capital from the industrial city of Beresio. Thousands joined them for the Rose House rally.

In addition, there were protests and highway barricades across the nation. In the impoverished Buenos Aires district of La Matanza, 3,000 unemployed workers and their families set up barricades and tents two weeks ago, braving the cold of the approaching winter.

Brazilian unions initiate protest campaign

Sao Paulo unions organized protests on May 15 and 16, demanding that the working class not be made to pay the cost of Brazil's energy emergency. A drought has resulted in a sharp drop in Brazilian supplies of electricity, and the government is responding with a wave of blackouts to ration the utility.

Workers are concerned that they will be the ones to bear the brunt of the costs. The metal workers union estimates that more than 855,000 workers will be sacked from the drop in production caused by the blackouts.

Education workers strike in Colombia

Three hundred fifty thousand education workers and hundreds of health workers began a strike of indefinite duration against government budget cuts that would remove \$4 million from education and health programs. The workers struck May 9-10 as a warning of further strike action.

Teachers union (FECODE) President Gloria Ramirez declared: “We are engaged in a struggle to defend the right of the poor to an education and to health benefits.” She indicated that the government is slashing funds to municipal and provincial governments in the context of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

Teachers protest in Mexico City

Striking teachers from Southern Mexico have set up camp in the historic downtown district of Mexico City and promise not to leave until their demands are met. The teachers are from the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero and Veracruz. In addition to salary improvements, the strikers are demanding breakfasts, scholarships and textbooks for their students. The job action began on May 14.

The education workers are aggressively leafleting in shopping areas and subway stations, campaigning to inform the inhabitants of Mexico City of the conditions under which they work and the living conditions of their students. “We witness every day that these children never eat proper breakfasts. All they bring to school is a tortilla, salt and a hot pepper. To

us that is not adequate nutrition, but we do not have the funds to remedy the situation,” commented an Oaxaca teacher manning an information table. “There are some that think that we only care about ourselves, but this is not the case. We fight for the creation of social programs to create jobs so that workers are not forced to emigrate to the cities or to the United States to look for work.”

Unions to accelerate Venezuela strike wave

Venezuela's largest union federation, the Workers Confederation of Venezuela (CTV), is considering a general strike to support striking steelworkers. On May 16, the CTV instructed its member unions to engage in strike action in the next few days. About 10,000 workers employed by Siderurgica del Orinoco (SIDOR), Venezuela's biggest steel producer, have been on strike for three weeks over a new collective bargaining agreement. On May 16, 20,000 workers from Bolivar state walked out for four hours in solidarity with the SIDOR workers.

The strikes take place in the context of a political struggle between the unions and the government of Hugo Chavez. Carlos Ortega, leader of the oil workers union, declared on May 17 that this conflict “is on the move; it is a declaration of war.” Among the unions poised to strike this week are Caracas's transit and health workers, as well as communications and aluminum workers from the state of Bolivar, where most of the country's non-oil industry is concentrated.

Protests sweep Ecuador

Protests by peasants and workers swept Ecuador last week. Beginning May 15, farmers blocked off the main access roads to Guayaquil, the country's main port city, for tens of kilometers using rocks, burning tires, trees and open dikes. There were reports of several injuries and arrests at different locations. Farmers object to the Agriculture Ministry's fixing of prices for a quintal of rice at \$14.50 and corn at \$7.50. Protesters are demanding prices of \$24 for rice and \$12 for corn.

On May 16, Ecuador's power workers launched a 48-hour strike to protest President Gustavo Noboa's plans to privatize the Andean nation's electrical power. Two unnamed US corporations and the Spanish Union Fenosa have already declared their interest in buying into the country's power sector when the auction is held in July. The International Monetary Fund demanded the privatization scheme in exchange for a \$300 million credit.

In the capital city of Quito, members of the National Symphony Orchestra marched into the Independence Plaza and played Latin and Ecuadorian concert pieces to protest low wages. Ecuador Pillajo, the orchestra's concertmaster and the country's most talented violinist, told reporters he only makes \$160 a month and is considering leaving the country to play for the Miami Symphony.

Orange workers occupy plantation in Haiti

Peasant farmers and union members have occupied the Guacimal/Remy orange plantation at St. Raphael in northern Haiti to protest mistreatment by management. About 300 workers are employed picking bitter oranges—used in Cointreau liqueur—at the operation, which is part-owned by the French beverage giant Remy Cointreau.

In October, 2,000 plantation workers registered as a union with Haitian authorities and submitted a list of grievances. However, after no negotiations took place the workers struck in December. The strikers

faced harassment, including armed assaults by security guards. The mayor of St. Raphael eventually intervened to break the strike. Management then attempted to bar union members from returning to work.

In the recent period management has attempted to discriminate against union members in the distribution of land parcels used for cultivation during the off season when oranges are not harvested. The union joined with a newly established organization of local farmers to protest the stepped-up harassment. The farmers have declared they will no longer turn over half their harvest to plantation supervisors, as they did in the past, and that they will not submit to orders from overseers or watchmen.

Chicago utility workers strike Peoples Gas

Over 1,000 members of Gas Workers Union Local 18007 in Chicago walked off the job midnight May 18 after rejecting a contract offer by Peoples Gas. Workers rejected the four-year proposal by a 2 to 1 margin, objecting to the company's demands to scrap overtime, shift union work to nonunion company personnel and reclassify safety-sensitive work to entry-level positions. The contract rejection represented the second time workers had turned down a company proposal. The latest offer withdrew an earlier demand by the company to immediately lay off 36 workers.

Teachers sick-out in Arizona

Over 800 teachers in a Tucson, Arizona school district staged a sick-out May 18, one day after a tentative agreement was reached between the school board and their union. The proposal, termed a "good and reasonable one" by Tucson Education Association Vice President Marilyn Freed, was opposed by many teachers as not fulfilling wage demands. The agreement spreads annual wage increases between \$3,000 and \$6,000. Other teachers were upset that the school board was covering wage increases by using last year's 0.6-cent state sales tax hike, instead of district funds. The board's sleight of hand attempts to focus anti-tax sentiment against teachers.

Arbitrators oppose wage hike for United flight attendants

On May 15 an arbitration panel ruled 2-1 against a pay raise bid by United Airlines' flight attendants. The workers had been hoping for a pay hike midway through a 10-year contract. United and the Association of Flight Attendants differed on the airline's estimated labor costs by some \$125-130 million dollars. The airline's tactic of inflating its costs for flight attendants above that of other major carriers was cited as the reason the one supposedly neutral arbitrator on the board sided with the company. American and Delta Air Lines are presently negotiating agreements with their flight attendants.

Machinists union wants release from talks with United

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) called on a federal mediator May 18 to release its negotiating committee from contract talks with United Airlines. If granted, a 30-day countdown towards a possible strike would begin.

The release was called for on behalf of some 15,000 customer service, reservations, food service and security workers who belong to IAM District 141 at United. The union accused the airline of delaying tactics and revealed that the two sides were deadlocked on wages, pensions, job security and health benefits. District 141 also represents 15,000 of United's mechanics, who asked for a release from negotiations back in November of 2000.

Machinists continue contract talks with St. Louis Boeing

Boeing and the International Association of Machinists continued negotiating into the weekend on a labor agreement covering 3,200 workers at the company's St. Louis facility. Boeing is demanding "flexibility" in the current negotiations while claiming to offer job security, wages and pensions. An IAM District 837 representative remarked, "We don't like what's been offered. We're waiting for a better offer."

Study shows overwork in US

A recent study indicates US workers are plagued by heavy workloads

with the resultant stress, mistakes, family neglect and higher health-care costs. The New York-based Families and Work Institute surveyed 1,000 workers of whom 46 percent responded they felt overworked to one degree or another. Various categories were indicated in the report. Some 28 percent indicated they often felt overworked; another 28 percent answered they were overwhelmed. Nearly a third said they felt they had "no time to reflect on their labors."

Women indicated they were more overworked than men, while workers aged 36-54 felt they had higher workloads when compared to workers ages 18-35. About 24 percent answered that they spent 50 or more hours on the job each week. Another 22 percent said they worked six to seven days a week; 25 percent answered that they don't use vacation time allotted to them because of their workload.

Those saying they were overworked also related that they neglected personal and family relationships. Overworked respondents said there were also feelings of anger directed towards employers and resulting job terminations. Of those who felt overworked, 17 percent admitted they made mistakes at work. Of those who did not feel overworked, only 1 percent said they made mistakes.

BC health workers threaten job action

Unions representing more than 14,000 health-care workers in British Columbia announced that they will begin a job action May 22, starting with a province-wide ban on overtime and escalating from there. In addition, some areas will see rotating reductions in essential services.

A number of unions are involved in the action representing pharmacists, x-ray technicians, therapists, lab technicians, paramedics and other specialized workers in the province. They will join an ongoing campaign by BC nurses who have been involved in rotating overtime bans and other actions to protest lagging negotiations with the province. The main issues in the current dispute are wages and benefits, with unions asking for up to 27 percent increases over two years while employers are only offering up to 14 percent over three years.

Unions were given a strike mandate of over 90 percent following the expiration of their last contract on March 31. In the recent election campaign, the incumbent New Democratic Party government had pledged an infusion of cash to quell unrest among health-care workers. The plan has been condemned by the newly elected Liberal government of Gordon Campbell.

Workers strike National Gallery in Ottawa

Over 200 workers at the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography went on strike last week after over a month of working to rule. The strike has been timed to coincide with the opening of a much publicized exhibition of the works of Gustav Klimt, which begins on June 5.

The striking workers, who are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), include technicians, installers and administrative staff. The union says they are fighting for improvements in wages and benefits. PSAC is seeking a three-year contract with provisions to cover inflation while the museum is asking for a five-year deal.

PSAC negotiators have said they have contacted major lenders to the Klimt exhibit to warn them that unqualified replacement workers will be handling shipping and installation of their art treasures, many of which have never before been shown in North America. Management has said that the exhibit will go ahead as scheduled with the use of management staff.

Ottawa to close last coal mine in Cape Breton

After over a year of bitter struggle and layoffs that put over 1,000 miners out of work, the federal government announced last week that the remaining coal mining operation on the island of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia will be closed down by this fall, putting 440 miners on the unemployment line.

The announcement by Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale

comes less than a week after an offer by the Cape Breton Miners' Cooperative to buy Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco), the government-owned company that operates mining in the region. The cooperative made the bid after learning that a deal with an American company to take over the last remaining mine would not go through.

The federal government, which has operated Devco since 1967, has been losing money on coal mining for decades and has been determined to divest itself of its holdings. Already one of the most economically depressed regions in the country, Cape Breton now faces an even more uncertain future with the removal of what was once its main source of employment.



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