

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 June 2001

Unemployed demonstrate in Argentina

On June 20, a mobilization of residents forced border troops to abandon their crackdown on workers protesting unemployment in the town of Mosconi, near the border that separates Argentina from Bolivia and Paraguay. The troops carried out a pre-dawn raid and arrested 18 pickets. Within hours, however, the initial 30 demonstrators were joined by some 600 more in the square, chanting “assasins and subversives” at the troops. The 150 soldiers were ordered to retreat, with nervous officials claiming that they had spotted snipers among the protesters.

The same day over 200 workers and students, including airline workers, unemployed oil workers and teachers, marched on the provincial legislature in Mendoza, Argentina’s fourth largest city, in solidarity with the protesters in Mosconi and to demand an end to army repression.

On June 17, border police killed two workers and injured dozens more while expelling unemployed protesters in Mosconi and Tartagal, another town in Salta province. Using tactics developed during the period of the dictatorship, and claiming that outside agitators had infiltrated the unemployed protesters, the troops occupied Mosconi and conducted house-to-house searches, arresting a dozen protesters.

The region has become one of the most depressed in Argentina since the national oil company YPF was privatized. The privatization resulted in massive layoffs. Peronist Governor Juan Carlos Romero blamed protesters for the lack of jobs, saying the lack of labor peace was scaring away investors.

Buenos Aires protest against state violence

More than 10,000 workers and youth rallied June 21 in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, across from the Rose House presidential offices, to protest the violent repression of unemployed protesters in Salta province. The main columns of marchers came from the working class districts of Matanza and Liniers, southwest of the federal district.

The size of the demonstration, which blocked traffic in the capital, took authorities by surprise. Neither the official union federation nor the so-called dissident General Workers Confederation mobilized their members to go. Instead the march was organized by the smaller Argentine Workers Central (CTA) and left-wing organizations.

The Matanza contingent, led by CTA President Victor de Gennaro, consisted of unemployed pickets who had been manning barricades against police. In the course of their march

through the industrial zones of Liniers and Once, railroad workers, airline workers and other groups joined them.

Officials in the De la Rúa government have expressed concern that the “Salta effect” will spread to other regions in the country, particularly the industrial zones of Greater Buenos Aires and to the southern oil-producing province of Neuquen.

Comair strike ends

Comair’s pilots ratified a new contract June 22, ending a three-month strike against the regional airline. The strike by 1,300 pilots at the Delta Airlines subsidiary began March 26. Pilots approved the contract by a vote of 733 to 408, according to the Air Line Pilots Association. The deal includes a company-paid retirement plan and improved pay, but pilots complained it did not address the requirement that they be on duty as long as 370 hours a month in order to log 84 to 92 hours in the air.

Delta pilots approve contract

Delta Air Lines’ 9,800 pilots voted by a 70 percent margin to ratify the tentative agreement after a year and a half of negotiations between management and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). Delta says the contract makes pilots the highest paid in the industry. The five-year agreement provides for overall pay rises between 24 percent and 39 percent that are retroactive to May 2000. Average salary for a Delta pilot had been about \$158,000. The new agreement will result in average increases of about \$1,500 per month. Pilots at Delta Express, Delta’s regional airline, who fly the smaller 50-seat jets at a lower wage scale, received raises as high as 63 percent.

Mechanics union reaches agreement at American Airlines

American Airlines has reached a tentative agreement with the union representing 15,000 mechanics and ramp workers. The three-year pact with the Transport Workers Union provides raises of between 8 percent and 22 percent for different job classifications in the first year, and another 3 percent increase in each of the remaining two years. Union members are expected to take about one month to vote on the new contract.

Talks with other unions at the airlines are continuing. Flight attendants at American could legally strike as soon as Saturday, but the Bush administration has threatened to block any walkouts at major airlines. Talks with the Association of Professional Flight Attendants are expected to resume on Thursday. Federal mediators recessed the talks last Friday after no progress was made toward a new contract.

American also faces negotiations with the pilot union this summer.

Judge blocks suit by air traffic controllers fired for 1981 strike

A federal judge in Miami ruled last week that 3,600 air traffic controllers fired by President Reagan for striking in 1981 cannot pursue a group lawsuit charging that the federal government dragged its feet on rehiring them. US District Judge Donald Middlebrooks ordered that strikers still seeking jobs with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) take their claims first to federal agencies under a law passed by Congress last year.

The mass firing of 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) and their abandonment by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, unleashed a wave of corporate union busting in the 1980s. Reagan barred strikers from FAA jobs for life. President Clinton issued an executive order in 1993 allowing them to reapply.

PATCO, which now represents nonfederal controllers, filed a lawsuit in 1999 charging that the FAA, by design or practice, has been slow to include some 3,600 workers who applied for jobs. The suit also charged the agency with age discrimination.

Senate seeks to protect poultry industry from paying back pay

Sixteen US Senators, led by Trent Lot (R-Mississippi) and Tim Hutchinson (R-Arkansas) have begun a counter-offensive against a Clinton administration Labor Department report that found massive wage and hour violations in the nation's poultry industry. The report uncovered how the industry robs pay from some of the most highly exploited workers in America.

An investigation of 51 plants found every one of them in violation of wage laws. In the unlikely event that the Bush administration followed up on the findings, the nation's 174 poultry plants would be subject to penalties of up to \$2 million per plant and workers would be eligible for \$348 million in back wages.

In particular, the industry is guilty of deducting time from poultry workers paychecks for what is called "donning and doffing" time. This is the time employees spend putting on safety equipment, special clothing and washing tools such as knives.

The senators are arguing on behalf of the poultry industry that "donning and doffing" constitutes "personal time." They also argue that the Clinton administration interpreted labor standards differently and the industry should be allowed an undefined period of time to correct the practices

The Clinton administration only made the report public in January of this year, after Bush had secured the presidency. During his two terms in office, Clinton who received financial backing from the Arkansas-based poultry giant, Tyson Foods, did little to enforce regulations on the industry. The Bush administration, which inherits the report, has not yet made a decision whether or not to halt the procedure.

Health care workers strike in Nova Scotia

Hundreds of health care workers in Nova Scotia walked off

the job Monday to protest the impending passage of legislation that would strip 10,000 workers of their right to strike. It is expected that the legislation will be passed Thursday, one day after 2,900 hospital workers, members of the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union, are set to begin a full-scale strike. Another 6,000 nurses will be in a strike position in two weeks. Lab and x-ray workers, as well as nursing aides, are demanding wage improvements and working conditions.

Over the past week thousands of trade unionists and their supporters have participated in demonstrations to protest the proposed legislation, which would empower the government to dictate the terms of employment of the province's health care workers. The provincial Tory government of John Hamm was not able to pass Bill 68, the anti-strike bill, after the speaker of the provincial legislature assented to an opposition motion. This delay clearly is designed to try to create conditions in which the government and the union leadership can work out some kind of arrangement.

BC Liberals bar job actions by health care workers

In answer to growing labor unrest in the health care sector, the new Liberal government of Gordon Campbell has passed a bill outlawing overtime bans by nurses and a proposed strike by paramedics. The government action has provoked widespread protests by nurses and other health care workers across the province.

The bill bars health care workers, including nurses, from any job action for at least 60 days, and orders an end to a day-old strike by 14,000 technicians, therapists and pharmacists. The strikebreaking legislation is one of the first actions taken by the new provincial government and has set the stage for a confrontation with workers in the province. Nurses have been engaged in a number of limited job actions over the past weeks to protest the deterioration of public health care.



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