

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 July 2001

Suburban train strike in Buenos Aires

On July 3 three suburban lines serving Argentina's capital suspended services between midnight and noon. The Rail Workers Union (UF) and the Fraternity (LF), which represent the train operators, are demanding that back wages be paid. The train operators showed up for work but refused to move the equipment, taking advantage of a legal loophole that does not actually declare them on strike.

Following the strike, both unions rejected a management proposal that would have paid them their June wages and other compensation owed by July 11. They carried out a similar action on July 5.

Since last February, management has been unable to pay wages on time. The company, Metropolitan Trains (TM), claims that it is owed \$17 million in government subsidies.

Uruguayan health workers strike

Health workers initiated a 96-hour strike on July 6 in Montevideo to protest the closure of two medical centers by the Health Ministry. The Doctors Union (SMU) and the Anesthesiologists Society (MSAQ) have threatened to take the Ministry to court to force it to reopen the Midu and Comeac clinics. The government will no longer subsidize these clinics due to budget shortfalls.

Iberia pilots strike in Brazil

The Spanish airline Iberia cancelled 240 flights out of Sao Paulo on July 3 due to a strike by 1,850 pilots. This is part of a series of strikes scheduled for every Wednesday in July and every Tuesday in August. The pilots are demanding wage increases, better pension benefits, and a halt in the company's attempts to tie workers' pension benefits to productivity increases.

Iberia management presented a new offer on July 4 for a two-year contract that would cover what pilots have lost from Brazil's inflation. At the same time Iberia informed the pilots that it is considering contingency plans involving the cancellation of flights and the hiring of new pilots.

Cane workers strike in Paraguay

Paraguayan sugar cane workers have been on strike for more than 40 days. The members of two unions at the Capasa cane company were also on the 14th day of a hunger strike as of July 8.

The strike began on May 28 to protest the firing of union officials at the plant. The workers also object to arbitrary changes in job assignments and other violations of Paraguayan

labor laws. They blame the government-appointed manager, Gonzales Balbuena, and are demanding his resignation.

Oscar Martinez, one of the union leaders, said that no other demands are being raised by the strikers, other than Balbuena's removal: "We only ask that this person go away, and that the government appoint an honest person to run this company. We are in a precarious situation because we have been on the streets for over a month with no money."

Medical center charged with scapegoating employees in rape scandal

Nine victimized workers and a broad group of supporters have charged the University of Virginia Medical Center with covering up management wrongdoing by scapegoating innocent workers in the wake of a rape scandal.

Three rapes of psychiatric patients took place in the medical center and one worker has been charged in two of the cases. When an investigation disclosed the accused worker had a felony drug record, the hospital unleashed a probe of the records of temporary and probationary workers. Nine were found to have felony convictions and they were all terminated.

The hospital claimed the terminations were justified because the workers did not disclose their records. But a subsequent inquiry revealed that five of the workers had properly disclosed their past convictions.

A campus organization, the Labor Action Group, which has held rallies and launched a city-wide petition campaign on behalf of the terminated workers, pointed out that the first of the rape victims had alerted management about the rape, but two weeks passed without any action being taken. The medical center had been under federal scrutiny and was in jeopardy of losing \$230 million in Medicare funding and critics charge the terminated workers were sacrificed to salvage federal funding.

Bankrupt LTV and steelworkers union agree on concessions

The United Steelworkers (USW) union announced July 6 that it had reached an agreement with bankruptcy-plagued LTV Steel concerning its 9,000 union workers. No contract details were released. The agreement came after LTV first threatened liquidation, then went to court seeking to impose a contract on the union.

The USW had been attempting to implement a formula whereby a percentage of workers' wages would be funneled into a fund that would serve as collateral for a loan. It was not clear who would administer the fund. But LTV rejected the

proposal.

The company said it required \$800 million in cost-cutting, of which one-third was to be derived from concessions by the union.

Disney workers ratify labor agreement

Some 25,000 workers at Disney World ratified a three-year labor agreement by a 2-1 margin. The agreement raises starting minimum wages by a paltry 35 cents, to \$6.70 an hour. The highest hourly wage will be hiked to \$18.88. Disney agreed to raise the caps on pension benefits and put a limit on yearly hikes in health benefits that are deducted on a weekly basis from paychecks.

The contract covers a wide variety of workers, such as those who wear Mickey Mouse costumes, restaurant workers, hotel workers and transportation workers.

Ed Chambers, president of Local 1625 of the United Food & Commercial Workers, admitted that some workers will only receive annual lump-sum payments. "When we negotiate again in 2004, we're basically starting at the same wages as in 2001.

As part of the settlement, the labor bureaucracy secured the right to organize over 6,100 part-time Disney workers.

Best Buy penalized for cheating workers out of overtime

The Minneapolis-based retailer Best Buy Inc. agreed to pay a \$5.4 million fine after the Labor Department uncovered company policies that cheated some 70,000 workers out of overtime.

Workers were not credited with overtime for working hours on days off, meal breaks, after punching out at the end of their shift, and time spent waiting for managers to open the doors. The company also failed to keep accurate records of hours worked by employees.

Workers employed between February 1998 to February 2000 are to be paid back wages chiseled from them by the company.

Compromise halts health care strikes in Nova Scotia

The growing confrontation between the Nova Scotia government and unions representing nurses and health care workers was defused last week when Premier John Hamm brought forward a compromise proposal. The Tory Premier promised to rescind a new anti-strike law, Bill 68, which had provoked retaliatory actions by workers, and agreed to a form of contract arbitration.

Bill 68 was passed two weeks ago. It gave the provincial government the power to impose contracts and outlawed ongoing strikes by paramedics and technicians as well as pending strikes by two nurses' unions. Although the unions involved had called a halt to the strike actions, health care workers were threatening mass resignations. With the agreement, the union leadership quashed all ongoing and planned job actions.

The government has consistently rejected union proposals for an arbitrated settlement, and the form of arbitration they have offered would mean that a selection would be made between the final offer of one side or the other. To date both sides are far

apart on wage increases, with nurses asking for 20 percent over three years and the province offering only 10.5 percent. Health care workers are seeking 9 percent over the same term and the government has offered six percent.

Saskatchewan public sector strike averted

The planned strike by 10,000 civil servants in this prairie province was called off last Thursday when a tentative deal was reached between the government and the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union. Workers in virtually every department, ranging from jail guards to highway maintenance, were set to go on strike by last weekend in the absence of a contract settlement.

While details of the deal will not be released until it is ratified in the coming weeks, Joanne Crofford, whose ministry governs the Public Service Commission, has stated that it falls within guidelines established for other public sector unions in the province. That implies that the settlement provides wage increases of three percent annually and the resolution of other disputed areas such as work loads and pensions.

B.C. transit strike 100 days old

The strike by bus drivers and other transit workers in the lower mainland of British Columbia has become the longest transit strike in the history of the province, with no end in sight. Members of two Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) locals have been on strike against Translink and the Coast Mountain Bus Company since April 1.

Outstanding issues in the dispute are the use of part-time drivers and the contracting out of work. Both sides are currently awaiting a mediator's participation before resuming talks. While businesses and commuters have been severely affected by the strike, the union has taken no action to advance the struggle, although hundreds of striking workers took over Vancouver city council chambers last week to make their case heard.

Talks broke off recently when the company said that the mediators recommendations would cost them \$27 million, a figure which was perceived as a provocation by the union. The mediator himself, Vince Ready, has said that his proposals are revenue neutral and appealed to the company to review his figures. He has recommended increasing wages by 8.5 percent over three years and sending other disputed issues to a joint labor-management committee. So far, the new Liberal government of Gordon Campbell has said it will not intervene and will await a negotiated settlement.



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