

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2001

National strike in Uruguay

A 24-hour general strike in Uruguay, organized by the United Workers Central (CUT), to protest increasing unemployment—now at 15.6 percent—paralyzed the public sector on July 25. The strike was less successful among private sector workers because of employer intimidation, union officials said. The country's economy has suffered during the last three years as a result of the devaluation of Brazil's currency, the *real*, and the current Argentine economic implosion. Its beef exports have also been hit by an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease.

Protests over wage cuts and unemployment in Argentina

On July 27, 2,000 workers marched on the provincial government building in Posadas, Misiones in Argentina's northeast after 21 Peronist legislators joined governing parties to approve wage and pension cuts of 13 percent and higher. A police attack with tear gas and high-pressure water hoses led to a violent street battle, which left 20 people wounded and 15 arrested. As a consequence of the vote, Misiones' teachers launched an indefinite strike. Together with hospital doctors and other public employees, they have set up tents across the street from the provincial government offices.

Also on July 27, in the seaside resort of Mar del Plata, in Buenos Aires Province, more than 100 unemployed workers took over offices of the Provincial Labor Ministry, demanding the continuation of public assistance programs.

On July 26 Argentine Airlines (AA) employees pelted the company's offices with eggs and tomatoes to protest delays in the payment of mid-year bonuses and wage increases and demand the restoration of canceled routes on the airline, which was privatized by a Spanish consortium in 1999. The same day leaders of the Combative Class Current (CCC) announced that their supporters would block 54 highways throughout Argentina on Tuesday, July 31 to protest the increasing unemployment and the economic policies of the De la Rúa administration.

The government is pressuring the nation's labor unions to abstain from the protest and special police details have been assigned to guard the oil refineries in Neuquen Province. The CCC is demanding the government rescind cuts in wages and pensions, continue assistance to the unemployed and free those jailed during previous mobilizations.

Protests against new taxes in Guatemala

Five students were wounded in Guatemala City on July 26 during protests against new taxes. Police moved in on demonstrating students and workers who were burning tires in front of Congress as it voted to raise the Value Added Tax (VAT) from 10 to 12 percent. In addition, excise taxes will increase on liquor, cigarettes and bunker fuels that are used by industry.

Hunger strikes, slowdowns and strikes in Chile

Hernan Martinez, president of the National Postal Union (SINACAR), called on the Ricardo Lagos government to intervene in a conflict between postal employees in Santiago and Valparaiso and the Chilean Post Office concerning the victimization of a union delegate. Martinez threatened a national postal strike and submitted a letter to the government in support of five postal workers on hunger strike in Valparaiso, who are demanding that fired SINACAR delegate Juan Abarca be rehired. Three of the five protesting workers had to be hospitalized on July 23.

Employees of the country's Legal Medical Service went on a national slowdown strike on July 23 over contract negotiations. They are demanding improvements in wages and working conditions. Doctors and chemists who belong to the same state agency are supporting the workers.

On July 25, maritime workers in the ports of Valparaiso and San Antonio went on a 24-hour strike to protest the government's inaction on promised legislation. Two years ago, in a struggle over the privatization of the ports, the Frei government promised legislation that would compensate workers who lost their jobs as a result of the privatizations. The legislation would also have offered some security to casual workers, who are extensively used by employers. The union representing maritime workers, the CTMP, is also demanding that work on the docks be classified as "heavy," allowing workers to retire at 55 years of age.

Ecuadorian doctors continue strike

A national strike by 26,000 Ecuadorian doctors and nurses over salaries and government funding continued into its fifth week. The strike, which has virtually paralyzed some 1,800 of the Andean country's hospitals and sharply curtailed health services, shows little sign of resolution. Qualified doctors average between \$140 and \$190 per month after 10 years of training. The salaries rank at the bottom for doctors in Latin America and their union is calling for a \$52 per month increase while also demanding the government increase medical spending from 2.9 percent per year of the country's \$4.9 billion budget to 6 percent in the coming year.

On July 27 police attacked picketing doctors at Isidro Ayora Hospital in the capital city of Quito with tear gas. So violent was the attack that gas drifted into the hospital's maternity ward and two premature babies died.

Unrest due to the country's economic crisis could bolster the ranks of striking doctors as teachers and electrical workers may launch strikes to protest low salaries and the selling off of the nation's power industry to foreign corporations. The unions are debating a national strike on August 8 and 9 while organizations of indigenous peasants have launched protests in the countryside that

are to culminate in an August 10 march into Quito.

American Airlines offers contract to pilots

American Airlines, seeking to avoid a confrontation with its pilots, offered an immediate 15 to 20 percent wage increase along with a proposal for four months of negotiations followed by binding arbitration. A large group of pilots who marched on the company's headquarters booed the offer.

Under the proposal, pilots—members of the Allied Pilots Association—will give up their right to strike until their contract expires on August 31, 2005. Many of American's 11,000 pilots don't see the first year wage offer as significant because—since United's pilots broke through with record-setting wages—each subsequent airline has been forced to offer a so-called industry-leading contract. Pilots are taking the wage proposal for granted and seeking to obtain better working conditions.

American pilots have had several bitter confrontations. President Bill Clinton outlawed their 1997 strike after a few days. In 1999 pilots launched a sick-out when the company refused to increase wages for pilots at regional carrier Reno Air, which American acquired. Despite the fact that the company's move violated the existing labor agreement, a federal judge fined the union \$45 million and threatened to imprison the two union officials.

Illinois power workers strike continues

Some 1,150 power workers entered their second month on strike against Midwest Generation of Illinois as company and union officials resumed talks July 27. The strikers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 15, rejected Midwest's wage offer as insufficient and are opposing the violation of work rules and use of outside contractors.

Midwest is operating its facilities with management personnel. The company provides about one-fourth of all electricity for the state and up to 40 percent of the power for Chicago's west and northwest suburbs.

Horizon and pilots union reach tentative agreement

Horizon Airlines and its pilots union reached a tentative agreement July 27 after three years of negotiations centered on wages. No details have been announced pending ratification by the 687 pilots who are members of the Teamsters union. The contract is the first labor agreement between the two sides since pilots unionized. Horizon, along with Alaska Airlines, is owned by Alaska Air Group.

Union shuts down health care strike in British Columbia

After only two days on the picket line, the union leadership last week called off the strike by 11,000 health care professionals in BC under threat of legal sanctions by the provincial government. Despite the fact that the strike had been planned in defiance of recently passed legislation explicitly prohibiting such an action, the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSA) cited respect for the courts as the reason for calling off the walkout by 14,000 lab technicians, pharmacists, therapists and other health care workers. Union head Cindy Stewart stated, "We are doing this because we know our membership. And I know HSA members would be very concerned about appearing to be disrespectful to the court."

The law passed last month illegalizing strikes by nurses and health care workers mandated a 60-day "cooling-off" period,

which expires on August 8. Union officials claim they have not ruled out a resumption of the strike. The two sides are far apart on a number of issues, including wages, with employers seeking a two-tiered wage settlement. For the highest paid workers, management is offering a wage increase of up to 14.25 percent over three years, while the union has lowered its demands from 27 percent to 24 percent.

At the same time more than 20,000 nurses in the province have begun a mass resignation campaign, similar to that carried out recently in Nova Scotia, to protest the government's threat to impose a new contract. Over the last several months nurses have been involved in a bitter struggle, which included a campaign to refuse overtime that resulted in the newly installed Liberal government imposing back-to-work legislation. The two sides are reportedly \$300 million apart in provisions for a new contract.

London, Ontario city workers strike in second week

Seven hundred outside workers—including full- and part-time garbage collectors, sewage, maintenance, and recreational staff—began a strike in the southern Ontario city of London on July 20. The workers, represented by Local 107 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are demanding improved health benefits and wages.

The city is offering a two-year contract with wage increases totaling 5.25 percent, while the union is asking for increases of 4.5 percent in each year as well as better health benefits. According to the union, the city offer would actually mean wage reductions for one-third of its members who are covered by a separate wage package.

The main impact of the strike is on garbage collection in the city of 350,000, as well as a perceived threat to the upcoming Canada Summer Games. The union has said there was no plan to disrupt the games and blamed city negotiators for staying away from the bargaining table for three months. Tensions flared recently after the city took out a two-page ad in the local newspaper to denounce the strike.



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