

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 August 2001

Argentine union federation calls general strike

On August 4, the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), the federation that includes the majority of government workers, called for a general strike for Wednesday, August 8 to reject government-imposed wage cuts. A strike by the CTA, one of three labor federations, would paralyze schools, hospitals and other state agencies. It would also coincide with the second day of a two-day national mobilization by the unemployed, organized by the Combative Class Current (CCC).

On July 31 tens of thousands of unemployed workers set up picket lines across the nation, barricading major highways as well. Wednesday's mobilization and national strike will culminate in a mass rally in Plaza de Mayo, in central Buenos Aires.

Last week the Argentine Congress approved measures that would slash 13 percent from government workers' wages and pensions. Workers would only be paid in accordance with tax receipts after government bonds have been serviced. According to a CTA estimate, by the end of this year wages will have been cut by 26 percent.

Venezuelan oil workers strike

Some 5,000 Venezuelan oil workers struck Caracas's Sincor Venezuela Corporation on July 29 to protest the firing of a union official. Union leaders said that the strike would continue until the official is rehired. The stoppage was still in effect on August 3. Sincor normally produces 40,000 barrels of heavy crude oil per day.

Bogota paralyzed by bus and taxi protest

For two days last week, protesting city bus and taxi drivers wreaked havoc in Bogota, Colombia, as people were forced to seek alternative means to get to work and school. The drivers blocked the city's main arteries with their vehicles in a protest against a city policy that rations bus service to four days a week on a rotating basis. Mayor Antanas Mockus contends that this is being done because there is an excess of 8,000 buses and 30,000 taxis in this city of 8 million inhabitants.

Mockus is attempting to rally Bogota's population behind him, calling on them to walk and use their bicycles to break the strike, and is so far refusing to negotiate with the drivers. He contracted tow trucks to confiscate buses and taxis involved in the barricades and is also arresting drivers. The mayor has threatened to impose a state of siege on the city.

Border protest against US Congress vote to bar Mexican truckers

On August 3, huge lines of trucks shut down the Mexico-US border crossing between Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. They were protesting the decision by the US Congress to maintain a ban on Mexican trucks traveling in the US. Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexican trucks were to be allowed to travel freely in the US last year, but the Clinton administration barred their entry, citing supposed concerns about truck safety. The Teamsters union has led a chauvinist campaign against Mexican drivers

Health workers protest in Panama

Health workers at the National Oncological Institute (OIN) formed a human chain around the building to demand better working conditions from the Panamanian government.

Representatives of the workers indicate that during the last 40 years health workers have made every effort to provide good cancer treatment, despite budget limitations. While the government has not provided funding for improvements, the demand for services is greater than ever. Consequently, health workers are suffering from exhaustion. This is causing accidents, such as a recent incident in which 10 patients received excessive radiation and died.

Tentative contract at BellSouth

BellSouth and union officials for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) reached a tentative agreement shortly before the midnight August 4 contract expiration date for 54,000 telecommunications workers.

According to a company spokesperson, the contract calls for a 13 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement with some improvement in pension benefits. The contract also calls for something called "continuous bargaining." The company says it will allow both sides to reopen talks on any issue during the life of the agreement. Given the continual transformations and downsizing in the telecommunications industry, it is highly probable that such a clause will allow management to carry out restructuring at the expense of workers through the cooperation of the CWA bureaucracy.

Impasse in Minnesota state employees contract talks

Minnesota's largest state employees union has said it will recommend its members reject the government's latest offer and authorize a strike to break a deadlock in negotiations. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 6 has said Governor Jesse

Ventura's administration has refused to budge from its wage offer of 2.5 percent in each year of a two-year contract.

AFSCME has bargained for 6.5 percent per year in wages and opposes \$5 co-payments for seeing a physician. The 19,000 member bargaining unit represents public service and health care workers. Council 6's 500-member assembly is expected to recommend a rank-and-file vote that would be taken at the end of August.

Contract talks with the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees, which represents 10,500 white-collar professional workers, are also at an impasse. The union has called for a rejection of the state's proposal, which includes an wage offer of 2 percent in each year of a two-year agreement and a reduction of insurance benefits and increase in co-pays.

Kentucky uranium workers reject tentative agreement

Some 700 uranium workers at US Enrichment Corporation's Paducah, Kentucky plant have rejected a five-year contract proposal. Officials of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy (PACE) Workers Union Local 5-550 said workers would remain on the job on a day-to-day basis.

According to union President David Fuller, the vote for rejection was "overwhelming," but he declined to reveal the results. Workers objected to a clause in the tentative agreement by which the company made renewal of the contract after the first year dependent on securing a favorable contract from Russia for uranium. Workers also rejected terms for overtime compensation and medical benefits.

US Enrichment Corporation was set up in the early part of the 1990s as a government entity that aimed to restructure the uranium enrichment operation. It was privatized in 1998.

Bankruptcy judge okays LTV-steel union pact

A US bankruptcy judge approved a labor contract between LTV Corporation and the United Steelworkers (USW), paving the way for a ratification vote by 9,000 union members at the end of August.

Complete details are unavailable, but the judge's decision came in opposition to some shareholders in the steel company. Sources say the company sought to reduce pensions and health benefits while cutting 500 jobs. The company came to an agreement with the USW to slash 1,300 jobs in return for salvaging pensions and benefits. The company will also borrow \$140 million from a benefits guarantee fund that was set up by the union in the event LTV went under.

Four-month Vancouver transit strike ends

British Columbia's Liberal government passed legislation last week forcing an end to a four-month strike by 3,500 members of the Vancouver-area public transit authority. The Canadian Auto Workers, the principal union involved in the dispute, welcomed the Liberals' intervention, although the government-imposed contract will allow the Coast Mountain Bus Company to proceed with plans to contract out work and hire part-time drivers.

Under the Liberal legislation, the company has been able to

keep existing contract language that permits contracting out and union and management officials are instructed to continue to negotiate over the use of part-timers until the end of the year. If by then they haven't reached a settlement, an arbitrator will be empowered to dictate one. However, the arbitrator is specifically instructed that his decision must meet management's demand for greater efficiency and flexibility. Half of any money the company saves from using part-timers must be passed onto the workers.

Earlier, the CAW had proposed its own plan to save the company \$6 million by reducing overtime and cutting the wage rate for new hires, if management would forego its demand for part-time drivers.

British Columbia nurses threaten to resign en masse

More than 5,000 British Columbia nurses are threatening to resign en masse later this month in a protest designed to circumvent government plans to strip them of the legal right to mount traditional forms of job action.

In June, BC's newly-elected Liberal government passed legislation imposing a 60-day "cooling-off" period in the contract dispute between the nurses and the provincial health authority. The legislation outlawed a union overtime ban, which, because of a chronic shortage of nurses, had forced the cancellation of many non-emergency operations and procedures. The Liberals have signaled that should the nurses resort to job action when the cooling-off period expires later this month, they will respond with legislation outlawing it.

BC Health Services Minister Colin Hansen has dismissed the threat of mass resignations, saying the government would have no difficulty recruiting nurses elsewhere in the country to work under the terms of its latest contract offer. Meanwhile, the right-wing *National Post* has urged the Liberals to imitate Ronald Reagan's 1981 mass firing of striking US air traffic controllers and dismiss any nurse who does not withdraw his or her resignation threat by a specified date.



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