

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 September 2001

March against poverty in Argentina

On September 21, more than 15,000 people assembled in May Square across from the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires to demand a national vote on unemployment insurance. Victor Gennaro, leader of the Argentine Workers Central, spoke at the rally: "Since the government is afraid to death to give official approval to this referendum, we are going to carry it out on December 10, to press for unemployment insurance." In addition, Gennaro demanded \$380 for each unemployed head of household.

The rally was the culmination of seven marches beginning 11 days ago that originated from different corners of the country. Over 120,000 workers and students were involved at different times. Some of the protesters had marched for more than 2,500 kilometers. Argentina has now entered the fourth year of economic recession. Officially, 17 percent of its labor force is unemployed.

Volkswagen to lay off 16,000 Sao Paulo workers

Citing a falloff in car sales, which company officials blame on the economic crisis in Argentina, the devaluation of the Brazilian real and the terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York, Volkswagen announced it would furlough 16,000 workers at its Sao Bernardo do Campo plant in Sao Paulo. The temporary layoffs, which will last for at least 10 days, will begin in October. VW workers at the plant were recently involved in rolling strikes and other job actions to demand payment for large productivity increases.

This is the second time this year that the plant will lay off workers. Last week a spokesperson for the Metal Workers warned that the union would begin strike action if layoffs were imposed.

Bahia oil workers win back pay after 11 years

After fighting in Brazilian courts for 11 years, the Chemical and Oil Workers Union of Bahia on the central Brazilian coast won a case in the Federal Supreme Court against 17 petrochemical companies for failure to pay a 1989 agreed-upon raise of 75 percent.

The amount won is more than R\$400 million to be distributed among 16,500 workers. Although favorable, the ruling far from guarantees the prompt payment of the award to the petrochemical workers. For that, the union may have to sue each company individually.

The association that represents the firms involved in the suit denounced the decision and declared that the settlement will force some of their members into bankruptcy. Union director Rui Costa made it clear that the union was open to a negotiated settlement that would not harm the industry's financial health. The workers began this struggle in 1990, mobilizing in a series of strikes in 1990, 1992 and 1993.

New York workers made to pay for consequences of

hijacking attack

The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees began a drive for wage reductions for its members aimed at bailing out Broadway theater companies whose box office receipts were dramatically affected by the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center.

Workers will take a 25 percent pay cut over the next four weeks for five musicals presently running on Broadway. "We consider ourselves ... rescue workers of Broadway," said Mike Sullivan, vice president of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees.

Meanwhile, 3,000 New York hotel workers, 1,200 office cleaners, electricians and elevator operators have lost their jobs. Some lost their jobs due to the destruction of their buildings while others have been laid off by management because of falling demand for their services.

Many immigrant workers who held jobs in hotels near the World Trade Center kept identification cards at their workplace, such as Social Security cards, driver's licenses and immigration papers. These were lost during the evacuations making it extremely difficult for them to find other employment.

Flight attendants union opposes unilateral actions by airline management

In the face of the mass layoffs announced by major US airlines, the leadership of the Association of Flight Attendants has issued some mild criticism of the airline industry, saying it is using the September 11 terror attack to violate contractual obligations. The AFA has also complained that the present \$15 billion bailout package for the industry is aimed at securing corporate solvency only, while ignoring the plight faced by airline workers who are being laid off.

The AFA is not protesting the layoffs per se, but only the fact that management is not working with the labor bureaucracy to implement the job cuts under language contained in union contracts. "In announcing layoffs, many in airline management are refusing to follow the contracts they have negotiated, which outline methods for furloughs and layoffs that are less hurtful to flight attendants and their families," the AFA stated.

Boeing union meets with management over layoffs

Union officials representing Boeing engineers and technical workers are involved in meetings with management and Washington State Governor Gary Locke to discuss the aerospace giant's decision to cut 20 to 30 percent of its workforce, or as many as 30,000 positions.

Charles Bofferding, president of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), announced, "We will also look very carefully at the justification for layoffs. We

believe the company has outlined a worst-case scenario.” As an alternative to outright layoffs, Bofferding has offered the union’s services to help management reduced its payroll through job sharing, transferring workers to defense projects, offering early retirement, or retraining workers for deployment in other areas of the company.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents production workers, has made it clear that it will not oppose job cuts. The IAM, however, is calling on Boeing to spread the layoffs more “equitably” by eliminating the jobs of subcontractors instead of dues-paying union members. The *Wall Street Journal* noted last week that even before September 11 Boeing was preparing job cuts because of the economic slowdown, and that “its largest unions had accepted that some cuts were inevitable.”

Unions for AirTran Airways accept cuts

The Teamsters union has come to an agreement with AirTran Airways to reduce the workweek and cut benefits of its members in order to prop up the airline in the wake of the September 11 hijackings that shut down the US air transportation system. Some 531 mechanics, inspectors and clerks will have their workweek reduced and benefits cut through October 31, resulting in a savings to the company of 21 percent in employee costs. AirTran’s pilots union agreed to a similar agreement reducing pay and benefits by 15 percent.

Grocery union charges unfair labor practice in New Jersey strike

The United Food and Commercial Workers union is charging strikebound Shop Rite stores with unfair labor practices involving television and radio ads claiming stores are fully stocked and staffed. The company’s wage offer puts top scale at about \$11.00 an hour. The union charges the company is advancing a benefits proposal that will be financed by raiding workers’ pension funds for \$1 million.

Bay Area transit management and union officials ratify contract

The Bay Area Rapid Transit Board and officials representing the Amalgamated Transit Union and Service Employees International Union have concluded final ratification on a labor agreement covering transit workers in the San Francisco and Oakland area.

The four-year contract calls for yearly base pay increases of 6 percent, 5 percent, 5 percent and 6 percent. Another 3.5 percent of base pay will be added to pension funds. An extra holiday on Martin Luther King’s birthday has also been added. The settlement fails to provide a solution for the heavy backlog of grievances. Union and management say they will continue discussions on this issue.

Michigan nursing home workers protest working conditions

About 400 nursing home workers in five Michigan cities are protesting a policy of health care benefit cuts and staffing reductions by Trinity nursing homes. Service Employees International Union Local 79, which represents a variety of workers, including housekeeping, dietary and Certified Nurses Aides, is protesting the lack of progress in six months of contract talks over these issues as well as wages.

Because of the staffing shortages at Trinity’s facilities, workers

are regularly forced to put in double shifts, which endangers patient care. The SEIU is seeking caregiver-to-patient ratios of 1:8 during the day, 1:12 during afternoon hours, and 1:15 on the night shift. Current Michigan law does not require any specific ratios between Certified Nurses Aides and patients.

Government union suspends strike, accepts rejected contract

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in the US, the rotating strike campaign, which has been pursued by the union representing federal civil servants across the country, was suspended last week and the union leadership is now recommending the contract they previously rejected.

No reason has been given for the sudden about-face by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) other than to cite improvements in benefits which were present in the government’s last offer that was flatly rejected prior to September 11. The recommended deal will contain the same wage increases of 8.74 percent over three years. The union had been seeking up to 15 percent. Over 70,000 government workers are involved in the dispute, employed in a wide range of government agencies.

There is, however, a split within the union negotiating teams with two endorsing the agreement and two opposing it. The union leadership nevertheless will submit the contract to a membership vote over the next six weeks, the outcome of which will determine whether or not strike action will resume.

Scabs used in northern Ontario nursing home strike

The strike by 88 social workers and nursing home attendants, which began on September 6 in the northern Ontario community of Kirkland Lake, has been marked by the use of scab labor and a media campaign to turn public opinion against the strikers.

The strikers are members of Local 3440 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees and are on strike over job security, wages and a fair drug plan. The Kirkland Lake Association for Community Living (ACL) has responded to the strike with the use of scab labor from a union-busting company from Windsor, Ontario owned by the infamous Wayne Strong. In addition, employers have taken out full-page ads in the local paper condemning the strike while refusing to resume bargaining. More than 60 workers recently concluded a five-month strike against ACL in Fort Frances, Ontario, near the US-Canadian border with Minnesota.



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