

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 October 2001

Peruvian government attacks workers

On September 27 the Peruvian government of Alejandro Toledo declared a 24-hour strike by health workers to be illegal. The day before police attacked social security workers who sought to return to work.

On September 25 police launched tear-gas barrages and high-pressure water cannon against demonstrating social security workers in downtown Lima. The government of former President Alberto Fujimori had fired the workers.

President Toledo, a former World Bank official, assumed power 60 days ago. During his campaign Toledo made various populist promises to improve the conditions of workers and the poor, and now workers across the country are demanding he carry them out.

Argentine airline employees protest

Protesting baggage handlers and clerks of Aerolineas Argentinas, members of the Association of Airline Persons (APA), blocked a Madrid-bound Iberia Airlines flight at Buenos Aires Ezeiza Airport in a protest to demand the payment of back wages. Two APA leaders were arrested.

The workers formed a human chain in front of the Iberia gate, chanting that they had not been paid in 57 days. To resolve the impasse, a judge arrived and gave the union the option of appointing a mediator to resolve the conflict. Following a brief assembly, the union accepted the offer and allowed the flight to proceed with some of the passengers on board.

Spanish owned Aerolineas Argentinas is currently bankrupt and up for sale.

Teachers and unemployed block Argentina-Bolivia border

Striking teachers, students and unemployed workers blocked the international bridge between Argentina and Bolivia on September 26 to demand the payment of back wages and to protest Argentina's economic and education policies.

The protesters blocked the bridge, which unites the Bolivian city of Villazon with La Quiaca in Jujuy Province, one of Argentina's poorest.

In addition the workers repudiated the province's policy of paying workers with food vouchers and demanded that the province take measures to save the school year for Jujuy students. The teachers have been on strike for two months.

VW union denies any further layoffs in Mexico

On September 22 the president of the Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITIAVW), Jose Luis Rodriguea, denied that there would be further layoffs this year at the VW plant in Puebla, Mexico. Last August, VW workers struck against the company for 17 days. Rodriguez admitted, however, that there will be "adjustments" in personnel if demand does not pick up in the United States. At the conclusion of the strike VW management

threatened to cut off investment in the country and ship production to China, where they claimed workers were less assertive.

Argentine unions to mobilize

Unions affected by several conflicts in the industrial city of Rosario, Argentina's third largest urban center, formed a coordinating committee on September 27 to mobilize workers against that nation's social and economic crisis. Delegates from ongoing struggles met in an occupied supermarket in downtown Rosario. These included steel workers facing wage-cutting at Villa Constitucion, meat packing workers at Swift, university workers forced to take a 13 percent wage cut and workers owed as much as six months' back pay.

The unions plan a mass mobilization for a date yet to be determined.

Argentina's recession is imposing depression-like conditions on a wide layer of the population. The latest reports indicate that 17 percent of the labor force is idle. Industry is operating at 64 percent of capacity, one of the lowest plant utilization rates in decades. Economists report that Argentina's third-quarter economic performance was one of the worst in history.

The 13 percent wage cuts have not become permanent, and further cuts will be imposed in wages, pensions and government programs next year.

Sao Paulo metalworkers to strike

The Metalworkers Union of Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil is poised to strike on October 1 unless Embraer, maker of commercial and military airplanes, rescinds its decision to lay off 1,800 workers, or 14 percent of its workforce. The union is demanding that the work be spread out among all the workers through reduction in weekly working hours with no loss in weekly pay.

Embraer management quickly rejected the proposal. While it claims not to have been affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, it announced that it will "reprogram" deliveries of 390 airplanes in 2001 and 2002. The company further claims that it has a backlog of orders for 543 aircraft valued at \$11.2 billion. It would save \$15 million if the layoffs take place.

Labor Department workers to strike in Chile

Employees of Chile's Labor Department announced that they will walk out on October 3 to bring their wages up to the level of other government agencies.

Cesar Huichalaf, leader of the National Association of Labor Department Employees (ANFDT), declared that there is a 40 percent gap between the wages of Labor Department workers and other government employees.

Valparaiso dock workers begin strike

Longshoremen in Valparaiso, Chile's largest port, demonstrated

on September 27 and announced their intentions to strike to force the government to carry out its promises of last October.

As part of a privatization scheme, the government had promised that laid-off workers would receive generous severance payments to establish small businesses. The government also promised improved benefits and working conditions for remaining workers. A union-imposed deadline passed with no government response.

Last Thursday workers blocked Valparaiso streets, battling police water cannon.

The stevedores have coordinated job actions with the ports of San Antonio, San Vicente, Arica and Iquique, all of which will participate in the strike.

Valparaiso, San Antonio and San Vicente were privatized in 1999. They represent over 60 percent of the tonnage that goes in and out of Chile.

American and Northwest to pay severance to laid-off workers

American Airlines and Northwest Airlines now say they will pay severance to employees facing furloughs in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center. Originally, American and Northwest, like other airlines, cited the September 11 tragedy in order to invoke an emergency clause in their union contracts allowing them to evade their responsibilities to laid-off workers.

American said the reversal of its decision was due to the arrival of the first payment from Congress of its \$900 million portion of the \$15 billion bailout of the airline industry. But one day earlier the company had stated, "Even with the federal aid and the job reductions, the financial situation is such that airlines are in a perilous position. The problem is the magnitude of the issue is so large." Even earlier, on September 24, American CEO Donald Carty had said that layoffs or the government bailout "are not enough to save the company."

Other airlines joined the stampede to invoke the emergency clause and avoid paying compensation packages to laid-off employees. United Airlines told its employees they would have no work or pay for much of October. US Airways admitted it was using its emergency clause to avoid compensating laid-off workers.

Grocery union charges California chains with intimidation

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union has filed an unfair labor practices charge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against grocery chains Albertson's and Safeway for intimidation and coercion against 28,000 Northern California employees.

The workers will be voting through October 7 on a three-year contract that the UFCW leadership has rejected. The UFCW calls the 50 cent an hour wage increase offered by the grocery chains inadequate. Albertson's and Safeway put together a video that they are requiring all union workers to view. In it, the company CEO's emphasize that the recent proposal is the "last, best and final offer" and "will not be improved, even in the event of a prolonged strike." The UFCW charges the video is a "flagrant attempt to deal directly with the employees so as to undermine the certified bargaining agents."

Right-to-work provision passes in Oklahoma

Voters in Oklahoma approved by a margin of 54 to 45 percent,

or 442,052 to 373,726, legislation barring unions from assessing fees, or union dues, to workers who come under their bargaining unit representation.

Republican Governor Frank Keating, backed by the Chamber of Commerce and a \$5 million campaign, led the campaign for the measure. It was opposed by the AFL-CIO, which also spent \$5 million in an effort to defeat the proposition.

Oklahoma is the twenty-second state to adopt the right-to-work clause. The last state to pass such a proposal was Idaho in 1986.

California nurses unionize

Nurses at the Northridge Hospital Medical Center in the Los Angeles area voted by 381 to 108 to join the Service Employees International Union Nurse Alliance. Nurses will begin to assemble a negotiating committee that will meet with hospital management to consider a labor agreement.

As with many hospitals today, low staffing levels are a major concern of Northridge nurses, both in relation to the heavy workload that falls on nurses and the safety for hospital patients.

Strike at Petro-Canada ends

Workers at Petro-Canada plants in Ontario have agreed to a new three-year contract, ending a strike that began almost six months ago. Members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), the 470 workers at Petro-Canada's oil refinery and terminal in Oakville and lubricant plant in Mississauga walked off the job in April.

In anticipation of a lengthy strike, Petro-Canada trained supervisors and other nonunion personnel to do the CEP members' work and vowed that production and the delivery of fuel and other products to customers would continue uninterrupted through any work stoppage.

The strike revolved around pensions and management's demands for changes in work rules. Under an agreement reached between the union and Canada's third largest oil company last March, the Ontario workers will receive a 3.5 percent pay increase in the first year and 3 percent in each of the following two years.

The union surrendered to the company's demand for a lengthening of the workweek from 37.3 to 42 hours. The 250 workers at the lubrication plant will also be subject to a new mandatory overtime provision. "The 42-hour workweek, we see that as an attack on workers and their downtime," said Dawn van Nostrand, the union's administrative vice-president for the Ontario region. "It was a rollback for us and it was one that we had to accept to get people back to work," she said, describing mandatory overtime as "the most egregious" part of the agreement, while claiming that as a result of the strike workers will see some improvements in pension and early-retirement rules.



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