Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 October 2001

Brazil: public university employees demand raises

After the Education Ministry violated a deal during a negotiated truce, strike leaders at Brazil's federal universities pledged not to return to work unless their wage demands were met. Professors and support personnel at the federal universities have been on strike for over 50 days. Leaders of the National Union of Docents (ANDES) and the Federation of Employees of Brazilian Universities (FASUBRA) made their declaration less than 24 hours after Education Minister Paulo Renato Souza boasted about his intention to redirect some US$150 million from the 2002 budget that had been earmarked for salaries.

In response, the National Students Union (UNE) proposed that next week be declared "National week to force the resignation of the education minister," during which students will mobilize across the country to support their teachers.

Venezuelan universities to strike this week

The Federation of University Professors Association (FAPUV) announced that it will begin a 48-hour strike on October 17. The work stoppage will affect universities, institutes and colleges. During the strike, professors will mobilize to protest the Education Ministry's lack of action on their wage demands.

Economic depression felt in Argentine elections

Over 2.3 million unemployed Argentines have no prospect of a job in the foreseeable future as a result of Argentina's four-year-long economic recession. Hundreds of thousands of others have seen their wages and working hours slashed. Many Argentines are so fed up that they either stayed away from the polls or spoiled their ballots in Sunday's congressional elections, which are expected to result in large losses for the ruling Alliance of the Radical and Frepaso parties.

Recent numbers tell a story of increasing poverty and social disarray. In addition to the 2.3 million unemployed, 2.1 million are working short hours and 3.2 million (not officially unemployed) are marginally employed in informal jobs. Half of all workers earn less than $339 a month. About 500,000 earn less than $100 a month.

Forty percent of the population are below the official poverty line of $120 a month. Fourteen percent are indigent (under $60). Five percent (230,000) of children under the age of 15 are forced to work. The top 10 percent earn 26 times what the poorest 10 percent earn. In 1974 that gap was twelve-fold.

Eight hundred strike against tank-maker General Dynamics

More than 800 workers at General Dynamics Land Systems have walked out at three plants. The workers are organized by the United Auto Workers and produce battle tanks and tank parts at plants in Lima, Ohio; Eynon, Pennsylvania and the company's headquarters in Sterling Heights, Michigan.

General Dynamics designs, manufactures and supports land and amphibious combat systems for the US Army and Marine Corps. Earlier this year, the company signed a $4 billion government contract to design futuristic armored combat vehicles. Management says it plans to continue production using nonunion personnel as strikebreakers.

The UAW called the strike when no contract agreement was reached midnight Sunday. Neither the company nor the union has made public the issues under dispute. Workers on the Sterling Heights picket line said they walked out over pension and health-care issues.

Campbell Soup hires permanent replacements at Texas plant

Campbell Soup Company has begun to hire replacement workers at its Paris, Texas plant after workers rejected its last offer and struck on October 4. Some 700 workers out of a total of 1,200 at the plant are members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 540 in this right-to-work state and consider the contract inadequate.

While hiring replacement workers Campbell also refused a return-to-work offer by the UFCW bureaucracy on October 7 and has set up barricades at entrances around the plant saying, "We decided we needed an agreement, if not a contract, that would protect our customers and our products."

Campbell is attempting to impose higher medical insurance premiums on plant workers, undermining pension benefits and trying to palm off a $1,500 lump sum payment in place of a wage increase. Concerning pensions, the company is seeking to throw out the defined-benefit pension

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plan and substitute a cash-balance plan that would reduce benefits for older, high seniority workers. The Paris plant produces 800 million cans and jars of soup yearly, contributing towards Campbell's annual sales of some $7 billion.

Pilots union accepts wage freeze at Sun Country Airlines

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) agreed to a tentative contract containing a one-year pay freeze for Sun Country pilots. Wages will remain at the level under the old contract that expired in August 2000. The new agreement will continue through October 31, 2002.

Sun County, a low-cost airline operating out of Minnesota, is also eliminating 25 pilot positions. The company's chief executive officer David Banmiller praised ALPA leaders for helping to preserve profitability at the airlines. "What we were able to accomplish collectively, both the union and us, is a recognition of today's economic difficulties," said Banmiller. Holding down wages and slashing jobs will aid the airline in applying for aid through the Federal Loan Guarantee program.

George Barbes, Jr., chairman of Sun Country's ALPA unit, was quoted by the AP as saying, "Sun Country's pilots recognize our responsibility to lead by example; by providing immediate and necessary accommodations so this company will survive and ultimately thrive." Pilots will vote on the pact later in October.

Bush proposal to frustrate claims by disabled Energy Department workers

Workers and surviving relatives of employees exposed to toxic substances at Energy Department facilities run by contractors are charging that a new set of rules proposed by the Bush administration, far from facilitating the payment of workers' compensation, are designed to frustrate them.

Speaking at a hearing before the Department of Energy, Gaylon Hanson, an employee at the Idaho National Engineering and Environment Lab, testified, "Instead of setting up procedures that will actually make it easier for these workers to file their workman's comp claims, the DOE has proposed rules that just set up another layer of bureaucracy."

Thousands of workers were frozen out of legislation passed by the Clinton administration under a procedure that provides medical care and $150,000 to sick Cold War-era nuclear weapons workers who were exposed to cancer-causing radiation, or silica and beryllium that cause lung diseases.

The present proposal for compensation is to use state workers' compensation laws to determine whether workers are eligible. These laws vary widely from state to state and have been written to protect corporations against claims by workers. Only if claims are approved by state compensation bodies will they then be forwarded to a proposed independent medical panel that will subject the applicant to a second round of considerations.

"I thought the purpose of the physician panel was to overcome some of the obstacles of the state compensation system and set up uniform standards by which the physicians will determine whether the illness is job-related," said Hanson.

Offshore oil workers join union

For the first time in North America, workers aboard an offshore production platform have voted to join a union. Four hundred twenty workers at the Hibernia oil platform off the coast of Newfoundland have joined the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) in what the union has hailed as a "victory on the high seas."

While the union has said it will begin the fight for a first contract, it is expected that Hibernia Management Development Corporation will proceed with a court challenge to block the union's certification. If a Newfoundland Supreme Court judicial review deems that the workers are governed by the province's Labour Relations Act, they will be prohibited from strike action and a mediator will be brought in to negotiate a contract.

CEP has said this is the first victory in a drive to organize workers in the offshore oil sector and their next target will be the Terra Nova offshore project, operated by Petro-Canada.

Calgary musicians locked out

Sixty-four musicians at the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) were locked out October 7 after rejecting the CPO board's final offer for a two-year contract. Picket lines were set up on Tuesday outside the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts.

The musicians rejected the offer, which called for a one-year wage freeze and a reduction of the season from 41 weeks to 38. While the union had agreed to accept the wage freeze, they were asking for four weeks of vacation and a 39-week season. The lock-out will last for an initial period of three weeks, which will be followed by a week of paid vacation. The CPO has said it is seeking concessions from musicians and other staff to address an operating deficit.

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