

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 October 2001

Chile: Municipal health employees to strike

Over 80 percent of Chilean municipal health employees voted to begin a national strike of indefinite duration on October 29. They are demanding higher salaries, permanent employment, access to training and changes in job descriptions.

Last March the secretary of state called on health workers to join in negotiations mediated by the government. The workers feel that nothing has been achieved since then.

Eleven wounded in Brazilian protests

A demonstration in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil organized by the Unified Workers Central (CUT) of Rio Grande do Sul ended in violence as workers battled the police. The occasion for the protest was a visit to Porto Alegre by Brazilian President Cardoso to inaugurate a new international airport.

Five hundred protesters, including many striking university professors, attempted to block the Cardoso caravan toward the new terminal. They were attacked by the military police, which used tear gas and rubber bullets. Workers defended themselves by throwing stones. A two-month strike by professors at the federal university system ended October 20.

CUT officials declared they would seek an explanation for police repression from Governor Olivio Dutra of the Workers Party.

Argentine miners occupy pit

One hundred miners in Rio Turbio began an occupation of their coal mine October 20. The miners decided to stay 2,400 feet underground, four miles from the entrance to the mine until their demands to keep the mine open and improve working conditions and wages are met.

Airline workers slowdown in Chile

Workers at Aero Continente airlines initiated a slowdown over unpaid back wages. Most workers are owed September wages and some are still owed back wages from April. On Friday, Marcos Flores, president of the Aero Continente union, declared a flight from Santiago to Iquique had been delayed for over an hour due to the slowdown.

Workers rallied at the terminal, intending to prevent the flight from taking off. After the police intervened to disperse the workers the flight was able to depart. Flores indicated that the demonstrations would continue before every Aero Continent flight.

The airline controls 70 percent of Peru's commercial flights and 15 percent of Chile's. It also flies to Miami and other US cities and has tendered an offer for the bankrupt Argentine Airlines company. Chilean authorities, however, suspect that the airline is being used by criminal elements for money laundering and have launched an investigation. The airline had agreed to pay workers their back wages by the end of September.

Assassinations of union leaders continue in Colombia

Paramilitary death squads assassinated Gustavo Castellon Puentes in the oil city of Barrancabermeja in Northeastern Colombia. Castellon Puentes was a leader of CAFABA, a workers family compensation fund. Other recent assassinations include Luis Manuel Anaya and Luis Alberto Lopez, treasurer and president of the Transport Workers Union.

Colombian authorities have discovered evidence that the paramilitary Colombian United Self-Defense Force (AUC), which organizes death squads, received substantial funds from Miami. An investigation is under

way to determine what links these self-described Colombian Contras have with right-wing Miami organizations and drug trafficking cartels.

Chiapas electrical workers fight for jobs

On October 16 electricians, members of Section 155 of the United Electrical Workers of Mexico (SUTERM), removed their secretary general, Erenoldo Gonzales Leon, and replaced him with Florentino Cruz Cruz.. Immediately after the vote, 90 union members threatened to take over the Chicoasen Hydroelectric plant to demand jobs.

Workers claimed that Gonzales Leon was turning a blind eye to the reclassification of jobs, paving the way for the privatization of the industry. Gonzales Leon is also suspected of enriching himself with company kickbacks.

On October 17 Section 155 members marched in Central Tuxla Gutierrez, capital of Chiapas state, demanding that the National SUTERM bureaucracy recognize Cruz as their new general secretary.

University workers to strike in Mexico

Agustin Rodriguez, general secretary of STUNAM, the Union of Employees of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, called on the entire membership of 23,000 workers to be ready to strike at any moment for better wages.

At an October 18 membership meeting, the STUNAM leader addressed 2,000 workers. He rejected government claims that there is no money for wage increases, declaring that the Fox administration bears the responsibility for obtaining the resources needed to give workers a 40 percent raise.

Minnesota state workers lose under tentative settlement

Leaders of the two unions involved in the strike by 24,000 Minnesota state employees admitted the pay increases workers gained in the tentative contract settlements would not make up for wages they lost during the strike.

It may be several years before workers regain lost ground under the deal union officials agreed to when they sent strikers back to work October 15. An average member of the American Federation of State, Country and Municipal Employees union lost \$1,200, while a member of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees lost \$1,900.

The state government was supposed to have dropped draconian demands that would have punished workers who face higher than average health-care costs. The two sides also agreed to extend benefits to same-sex partners of state workers and children in their custody. The measure, however, has come under attack. Republican State Representative Phil Krinkie, chairman of the State Government finance Committee, told the Associated Press that private businesses oppose the measure on the grounds it might set a precedent that they will be forced to follow. Not only must workers ratify the agreement, but the state legislature must also approve the contract.

Studies reveal possible links between night-shift work and breast cancer

Two studies in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* report that women exposed to light during nighttime hours may be subject to a greater risk of breast cancer. This is especially true of women who work night shifts on a regular basis.

One report found that women who worked 30 or more years on the night

shift, comprised of a minimum three night shifts per month, faced a nearly 40 percent greater risk of developing cancer compared to women who worked a normal day shift of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. An 8 percent increase in breast cancer risk was observed among women who worked night shifts for less than 30 years.

The second report focused on the role of exposure to bright lights during nighttime hours and its link to breast cancer. It is believed there may be a connection between interference with the human body's light-dark hormone cycles and cancer. One theory cites the growth of tumors in relation to decreased levels of the brain hormone melatonin, which can occur if humans are exposed to light during normal nighttime sleeping hours. Normally melatonin is at its peak during the night and lowest during daylight hours. A second theory postulates that when melatonin levels are depressed, female hormones are increased. The female hormone estrogen has been established as a risk factor for breast cancer.

Portland city workers set to strike

Some 1,800 Portland, Oregon city workers will strike October 22 unless their union and city negotiators reach an agreement over wages and benefits. The latest offer by the city is a series of so-called cost-of-living increases starting at 2.9 percent in the first year. The union representing city workers began with a demand for a 7 percent raise in the first year, which is now down to 4 percent, and cost-of-living increases plus 1 percent in each of the two remaining years. The city is also demanding that workers pay an additional \$600 a year for family medical coverage.

The city is attempting to balance its projected \$4.1 million budget shortfall for 2001 and a projected shortfall between \$6 million and \$30 million for next year on the backs of city workers, some of whom make as little as \$8.88 per hour.

The Portland *Oregonian* has attacked the city workers for daring to strike, writing: "Pressing forward with a strike at this moment looks like something approaching self-sabotage, designed to elicit nothing but public scorn." In a diplomatic message to the labor bureaucracy to sell out the strike, the paper continued, "And here's what gives us hope: Employees are smart enough to realize this. It's not just in the city's interest, but in their own best interest to act quickly—in last-ditch talks scheduled for today—to avert the strike.

Tentative agreement announced in General Dynamics strike

Over 800 workers at General Dynamics plants in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan continue to strike over health-care issues. United Auto Workers officials announced Monday that a tentative agreement in the dispute had been reached with management, but no details were released. Workers are striking to demand that General Dynamics restore health insurance to retirees, formerly a part of their contract but surrendered to the company by the UAW bureaucracy during a time when the company pleaded financial stress.

Now that the company has recovered, it has shown no signs of negotiating the health insurance issue. The company signed a \$4 billion government contract to design futuristic armored combat vehicles earlier this year and is determined to continue production even if it needs to hire strikebreakers. The company also makes the M1A2 Abrams tank for the US Army.

An Associated Press article intoned, "Before the strike has the opportunity to adversely affect the war effort, the UAW and General Dynamics management ought to sit back down at the bargaining table to get this ill-timed dispute settled."

Court ruling to allow more workers to join sweatshop suit

A US District Court judge issued an order allowing additional workers to join a class action suit against sweatshop garment makers on Saipan, a Pacific island protectorate occupied by the US in the latter part of World War II and capital of the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands. Lawyers representing 972 workers brought to Saipan from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Bangladesh and other poor nations, estimate the

order will allow them to add some 20,000 more workers to the class action suit.

The suit is an outcome of efforts by lawyers and civil rights proponents to expose the manner in which top-name US retailers and Asian sweatshop owners exploited the island's unique position as a US territory exempt from immigration rules, but inside the US custom zone. As a result, an alliance of Asian sweatshop capitalists and US retailers have reaped a windfall avoiding import quotas while being allowed to market clothes as "Made in the USA."

Meanwhile, some workers have labored behind barbed wire fences, been robbed of pay, subjected to poor health conditions and bad food. Saipan's minimum wage is \$3.05 an hour, when it is observed, compared to \$5.15 in the United States.

Eighteen retailers, including Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger USA, have settled for \$8.5 million and agreed to accept a monitoring system for their sweatshops. JC Penney, Levi Strauss, Target, the Limited and Gap continue to fight the lawsuit.

Cleaning subcontractor accused of cheating day laborers out of pay

Day laborers hired to clear off rubble from the site of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center complain they have gone without pay for up to two weeks. Milro Services Inc., the cleaning company contracted to do the cleanup, has palmed off responsibility onto a subcontractor.

The workers, many of them immigrants without documents, have nothing more than a verbal agreement with the foremen who hired them. Given the fallout in the hotel and restaurant industry, hundreds of desperate workers are lining up every day to claim the work, which is supposed to pay \$60 per 8 hour-shift and \$90 per 12-hour shift.

The New York State attorney general's office has taken complaints from workers as they investigate the case. The *New York Times* reported that a Ms. Morel was making arrangements to finally pay workers after being delayed by what she described as a paperwork problem.

United Airlines demands concessions

United Airlines has issued a threat that it will not survive financially unless 45,000 of its workers make contract concessions. In a letter to employees, the company claims costs exceed revenues by four times the rate before the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington DC. "Our number one priority now is to get United into a financial position that will allow us to continue operating," said chief executive James Goodwin of parent company UAL Corporation.

United was the recipient of \$390 million out of an eventual \$800 million in federal bailout money. But the company says it will lose more than \$1 billion as the recession deepens. The company is scheduled to begin negotiations with ground workers on October 31 and mechanics will resume talks November 6. In August, United pilots settled for what was described as an industry-leading contract that included pay increases of 28 percent.

The machinists and pilots unions have rejected Goodwin's prognosis for the airline and his demand for concessions. Machinist President Tom Buffenbarger said, "Goodwin's credibility with the IAM is shot." Herb Hunter of the pilots union responded, "I'd like to reiterate that the letter has not been substantiated to our union group by any kind of numbers."

British Columbia teachers return powerful strike vote

After over three months without a contract and facing new anti-strike legislation and a funding freeze, teachers in this west coast province turned out in force last week to deliver an overwhelming vote of 91.4 percent in favor of a province-wide strike.

Six weeks of negotiations between the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) and the B.C. Public School Employers' Association have left the two sides far apart on a number of issues including wages, class size and allotment of special teaching positions. The teachers are asking for a pay increase of 34 percent over the three-year term of a new contract to bring them up to par with teachers in other provinces such as

Alberta and Ontario, while government negotiators have offered only 7.5 percent over three years.

The Liberal government of Gordon Campbell announced an across-the-board spending freeze earlier this month, provoking angry responses in both the education and health care sectors. The Employers' Association has applied to have a possible strike declared illegal under new "essential service" provisions put in place by the government last summer. The union has not threatened illegal action, and is considering options such as refusing supervisory duties and staff meeting attendance, measures which would not be taken for at least a month.

Last minute deal averts St. Lawrence strike

Less than two hours before a strike deadline October 20, a deal was reached between the Canadian Auto Workers and the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation, averting a shutdown of shipping traffic on the Great Lakes.

Shipping on the 3,700-kilometer St. Lawrence seaway, which links the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean, was halted at Friday midnight but resumed Saturday afternoon with the announcement of a tentative contract settlement. Five hundred sixty operational, maintenance, supervisory workers covered by three different contracts were poised to strike at 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, following 10 months of unsuccessful negotiations.

The main issues in the dispute centered on wages, contracting out and safety measures which were reportedly resolved by maintaining the status quo. Wage provisions include a 2 percent increase in the first year and 3 percent in the following two years of a new contract. A strike would have had a crippling impact on trade through the essential waterway. The only other time Seaway workers went on strike was in 1968 in an action that lasted about two weeks.

Jacuzzi closes striking Mississauga plant

Around 60 striking workers at a factory west of Toronto will lose their jobs, following the announcement last week by the world's largest producer of whirlpool baths that they will shut down the plant in answer to a strike that began last July.

The workers, who are members of the United Steelworkers Local 9042 and have been fighting major concessions demands by Jacuzzi, are to be given only minimum severance provisions with the closure of the plant. In the weeks preceding the strike over 50 workers had been laid off and the remainder were asked to take wage cuts of up to \$5 an hour.



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