

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 October 2001

Unemployed demand jobs in Peru

Thousands of unemployed workers marched and rallied on October 25 in the Peruvian cities of Lima and Arequipa, demanding that President Alejandro Toledo create jobs. Joining them were thousands of provincial teachers who launched a 24-hour strike over wages in the departments of San Martin and Apurimac. The demonstrations and rallies coincided with Toledo's return from visits to China, Spain and other nations.

Meanwhile, in the city of Huaraz north of Lima, a march of hundreds of retirees demanded an increase in their pensions, which have been frozen for several years.

In Lima the majority of the marchers were workers fired under the government of Alberto Fujimori as part of the privatization of state-owned corporations.

In the southern city of Arequipa, Peru's second largest, unemployed workers demanded that Toledo go forward with a hydroelectric project that would generate tens of thousands of jobs for construction and utility workers.

Striking oil workers reject Brazilian government offer

Demanding a 68 percent raise, 34,000 Brazilian oil workers struck Petrobras on October 24. The company countered with a 6.4 percent offer, up from an initial 6 percent which the workers rejected. Union leaders declared the new offer a "provocation."

The five-day strike was to last until Sunday. However, angered by Petrobras' inadequate offer, the strikers have declared their intent to extend the strike beyond Sunday.

Under Brazilian law, Petrobras workers are forbidden from totally shutting down oil refineries. Reports indicate that one-fourth of the workers are still on the job and that production is down by about 70 percent.

Petrobras has called on Brazil's labor court to declare the strike "abusive," which would allow the company to fire the workers and impose fines on the unions involved. On October 26, the labor court ordered half of the strikers to return to work to maintain a minimum level of oil and gas production. If the union appeals the ruling it must post a \$18,300 bond.

Argentine workers demand jobs

Thousands of unemployed workers, teachers and government workers protested on October 24 demanding that the government create jobs. Unemployment in Buenos Aires has now reached 20 percent. Nationally it is approaching 18 percent, levels not seen since the Great Depression. Nearly one-third of Argentina's 37 million inhabitants now live in poverty.

The Buenos Aires rally was part of a 24-hour strike by government workers. Unemployed workers also blocked major roads across the country.

Disputed union elections in Venezuela

Elections in the Venezuelan Labor Confederation (CTV) were marred by street fighting in central Caracas by pro- and anti-government factions within the unions. Amidst accusations of fraud, the elections were suspended completely in the states of Zula, Anzoategui and Delta Amacuro and partially in Falcon state.

In Caracas there were reports that the "social-democratic wing" of the

bureaucracy tried to stuff the ballot boxes while candidates linked to President Hugo Chavez responded with tear gas bombs and gunfire to sabotage the process.

Venezuelan doctors threaten to strike

Doctors at the prestigious Jose Maria Vargas teaching hospital in Caracas, Venezuela are threatening to strike. Already nurses have posted signs protesting delays in their pay. Residents and nurses point out that the government is violating a contract provision that calls for a twice-yearly bonus and that time is running out before they will walk out.

Venezuelan health authorities are now promising that the bonus will be paid next month.

Panama's unemployed women demand jobs

Unemployed women in Panama's southern province of Colon rallied on October 26 to demand jobs from President Mireya Moscoso. The women carried signs and chanted slogans that made it clear that they do not want welfare but decent jobs. Most of the women at the rally were mothers and heads of households.

While the government admits that thousands of jobs have been lost in the Colon area, it is short on solutions.

Union-busting by United Nations World Food Program

The Haiti Support Group is extremely concerned about reports from the country's second largest city of Cap-Haïtien indicating that the local office of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and the Haitian government have colluded in suppressing and breaking a newly formed trade union.

According to information received from the First of May Batay Ouvriye union federation, one of the members of the federation, the Union of Warehousemen at the WFP depot in Cap-Haïtien, was busted the week before last. The warehousemen are responsible for distributing food supplies to the program's school cafeterias in the north of Haiti.

Apparently the immediate source of dispute is connected to two issues. First, the warehousemen's union was recently informed that a job that normally pays 10,000 gourdes (US\$400) would henceforth pay 2,000 gourdes. The resulting discontent led the local WFP management to call in outside workers, who agreed to carry out the work at one-fifth of the normal price. Thereafter, persistent rumors circulated that the WFP had decided to get rid of the union.

Second, management seemed to be hostile to the union's attempts to gain compensation for workers who suffered injuries on the job. According to the union, some of its members had worked in the depots for over 10 years. The union recently sought compensation for one worker who lost a toe in an accident at work. Another worker who recently had broken his leg at work had not received any compensation at all.

Minnesota governor calls for ban on state strikes

Minnesota Independent Governor Jesse Ventura believes that state workers should be legally barred from striking, announcing: "That's a philosophical viewpoint I have in the fact that I don't think a union should be capable of shutting down government." The remark came a little over one week after union officials representing 24,000 state workers ended the largest strike in Minnesota's history.

"My personal viewpoint is that government employees shouldn't be allowed to strike because it puts the government in a very precarious

position to be at, at a weakened state, that I don't believe the government should be in," Ventura stated.

The governor made a veiled threat against state workers. He reasoned: "The argument could be made that, well, you don't allow essential employees to strike. Well, why would you have nonessential employees that work for government? That's your next question. Shouldn't every employee be essential to the government?"

Jim Monroe, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees whose 10,500 members struck earlier this month, commented on Ventura's call to ban state workers' strikes: "I think he is far underestimating the impact of his words." MAPE members begin voting on a tentative contract agreement this week, with results expected November 20. MAPE President Deb Schadegg warned that the voting was "as close as a flip of the coin at this point. And if the governor continues to lower the bar, I think he could force a 'no' vote."

Tentative agreement averts strike for Bay Area transit system

Negotiators for the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area Rapid Transit system and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees reached a tentative agreement October 24 that averted a strike by the union's 238 train controllers and supervisors.

No details of the final agreement have been made available. Union members voted overwhelmingly two weeks ago to reject transit management's "best and final offer" and set a strike deadline for midnight October 22. That deadline passed as union officials announced that they had dropped demands for pay parity among workers doing the same job. The main issue that remained was job security.

Although the professional union represents a tiny fraction of BART's overall unionized workforce, members of both maintenance and train operator unions had said they would honor AFSCME's picket lines should the union decide to strike. That possibility would have caused a complete shutdown of BART's system.

Detroit school bus drivers rally against Teamsters bureaucracy

Hundreds of Detroit school bus drivers, members of Teamsters Local 214, held an angry rally in front of their union headquarters October 24 to denounce corruption by local officials and union collusion with management. Former union officials have alleged the local received hundreds of thousands of dollars in kickbacks from the Detroit Board of Education in exchange for the union's assistance in imposing a substandard health care package on Local 214 members and allowing management to withhold money owed to the workers. The money was allegedly put into a secret Teamsters trust fund.

Workers picketed with signs accusing Teamsters officials of stealing their money and representing management. The loud protest attracted truck drivers who began circling the hall and honking their horns. At one point Local 214 President Joe Valente attempted to flee through a back door but rank-and-file workers surrounded his luxury car and forced him back into the union hall.

In an effort to dissipate the workers' anger, representatives of Teamsters International President James P. Hoffa met with a committee of rank-and-file workers but rejected their charges that union leaders had stolen money. The officials then ventured into the crowd of workers and asked how many believed the charges were true. The hundreds of school bus drivers unanimously raised their hands. Teamsters officials then reportedly contacted Hoffa who claimed he would investigate the workers' charges.

New York: injured workers demand compensation

About 100 injured workers and their supporters rallied outside New York Governor George Pataki's Manhattan offices on October 24, demanding payment of benefits due them for workplace injuries, some of them which occurred more than 10 years ago. Speakers decried endless appeals, multiple hearings and other delaying tactics used by the state Workers' Compensation Board to postpone their cases, leaving workers'

compensation insurers free to cut off payments. Injured workers are often unable to obtain needed medical care, since physicians know they may not get reimbursed for years. Those whose injuries keep them from working are forced to apply for welfare.

The World Trade Center tragedy has left some 9,000 workers killed or maimed, under conditions where the Workers Compensation Board already has 200,000 unresolved cases. A number of workers injured in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing still await resolution of their claims.

The rally sponsors, the Chinese Staff & Workers' Association, Workers' Awaaz, and National Mobilization Against SweatShops, called for support of new legislation that would set strict time limits for the hearing of cases, provide for interim payment of living expenses, increase the minimum payment above the current \$40 a week, as well as abolish mandatory overtime, a major contributor to workplace injuries. Organizers also announced the filing of a lawsuit in Mexico against Governor Pataki and the New York State Workers Compensation Board alleging violations of provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

University of Manitoba strike ends

The strike by Faculty at The University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, which began October 23, ended three days later when the administration agreed to submit the contract dispute to arbitration. This comes following the rejection by the employer of a contract recommendation from a mutually appointed mediator.

The second strike in the last month at the university began when contract talks broke off the day before faculty walked out over the issues of parental leave and wages. The University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) had agreed to the mediator's proposal, which called for wage increases totaling 7.9 percent over three years and parental leave between 18 and 27 weeks. U of M administration have offered only 7 percent over the term of a new contract and parental leave of 10 weeks.

The administration has further stated that negotiations cannot be based on the mediator's report, saying the proposed wage provisions were not sustainable. Classes resumed last Friday and arbitration has already begun.

Talks resume in Calgary orchestra lock-out

Contract talks between the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and musicians resumed last week, raising the prospect of an end to the three-week-old lockout. The 64 full-time musicians were locked out by management when they rejected a final contract offer on October 6.

While both sides have agreed on a one-year wage freeze and a 5 percent raise in the second year of a two-year deal, they are still at odds over the issues of vacation time and the length of the performing season. The Alberta Union of Public Employees has donated \$10,000 for the musicians, which was matched by their union, the Calgary Philharmonic Players Association.

At the same time, musicians with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) have elected to take a 15 percent wage cut, given the choice between that or assuming ownership of the company. It is not likely that their give-back of almost a million dollars in wages will go far to remedy the crisis of the TSO, which has an accumulated debt of \$7 million. Former Ontario premier Bob Rae is negotiating on behalf of the 60-member Orchestra board, who have agreed to resign and be replaced by a new 20-member board.



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