

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 November 2001

One-day strike in Colombia

Nearly 300,000 government and private sector workers went on a 24-hour strike November 1 in Bogota, Colombia. Carlos Rodriguez, general secretary of the Workers United Confederation, said that the strike was called to protest the country's rising unemployment. The country's jobless rate—17.8 percent—is one of the highest rates in Latin America.

Bogota Mayor Antanus Mockus declared that the strike had been ineffective because bus and taxi drivers stayed on the job.

Venezuelan oil workers to strike on November 8

Two of the most powerful oil unions in Venezuela announced plans to carry out an eight-hour strike on November 8 to protest government privatization policies. The government has announced the creation of a natural gas company separate from the state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela.

Fish industry workers fight Chilean police

On November 2, fishing industry workers employed by a transnational corporation in the southern Chilean city of Puerto Monte fought against police during a mobilization to protest attacks on labor rights. When a column of workers tried to enter the site of the South American Motor Rally 2001, police attacked with tear gas and arrested 15 workers.

Workers occupy Paraguayan ministry

Scores of workers occupied the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Asuncion, Paraguay to demand urgent measures to reactivate economic activity and stem further sackings. Most of the workers were from the ceramic industry. The protesters warned that 20,000 jobs are about to be lost as a result of the ongoing recession. Paraguayan business is in crisis as about 150 companies have asked to close because they are nearing bankruptcy.

Many of the workers denounced electricity cutoffs to factories that force owners to send workers home. "In a country with abundant energy, the least that could be done to protect jobs is not to cut that flow," said one worker.

Eduardo Ojeda, leader of the National Labor Confederation (CNT), criticized the government for ineptitude and denounced speculators whose investments are hurting basic industry.

South Carolina dock workers to go to trial

Five Charleston, South Carolina dock workers go to court November 12 facing charges stemming from a January 20, 2000 picket line confrontation provoked by 600 fully-armed riot police at the Port of Charleston. The workers, dubbed the "Charleston Five," are Kenneth Jefferson, Elijah Ford, John Edgerton, Rick Simmons and Peter Washington. They are charged with rioting and conspiracy to riot that could result in sentences of up to five years in prison and individual fines between \$1,000 and \$5,000.

The workers, members of International Longshoremen's Association Local 1422, had been picketing for weeks against Winyah Stevedoring, which was using nonunion workers to load and unload boats of the Danish shipping company Nordana. On January 3, 2000, some 75 union members blocked a gate leading into the port complex, shutting operations for a few hours, for which the company has filed a multimillion-dollar suit.

When workers called for another protest on January 20, Charleston officials assembled a force of 600 officers along with armored cars, helicopters, patrol boats and guns loaded with rubber bullets. In the subsequent confrontation, a police car ran into at least one worker while several shock grenades were thrown.

Initially, eight workers were charged with misdemeanor trespassing charges and agreed to community service. Then South Carolina Attorney General Charles Condon stepped in to impose riot charges. When a Charleston county judge ruled there was insufficient evidence Condon convened a secret grand jury to obtain indictments. The five workers were held under house arrest until last month.

St. Louis school bus drivers strike draws ire

Teamsters school bus drivers in Columbia, Missouri honored picket lines set up by striking St. Louis Bus drivers in Fort Zumwalt and Francis Howell school districts last week. Both striking and non-striking bus drivers work for the same company, First Student, which contracts with both areas to transport students.

The action led to major delays involving more than a thousand students. According to clauses in the contracts the sympathy strike by Columbia drivers was legal. But Henry J. Waters III, publisher of the Columbia *Daily Tribune*, railed

against the strikers, calling the action “outlandish.” “Workers who refuse to work without a good excuse should be replaced permanently,” he said.

The striking drivers have starting wages of \$9 an hour and must work 11 years before attaining the top rate of \$13.10. Company negotiators offered a contract that merely reduced the time required to reach top rate to 10 years. Workers are seeking a new top rate of \$14 and a much more substantial reduction in the years required to reach the highest rate. Drivers in Fort Zumwalt are seeking five years and drivers in Francis Howell want two years. For drivers in Columbia who honored picket lines last week, the terms of their contract are even worse, as they get to the highest rate only after 15 years.

New York State paper mill seeks to replace strikers

The New York paper mill Finch, Pruyn & Co. has moved to replace 600 mill workers on strike since June of this year. The company, located in Glen Falls, New York, has placed advertisements in Altoona and Erie, Pennsylvania and Berlin, New Hampshire, where companies such as International Paper are either implementing layoffs or shutting down operations. Finch, Pruyn spokesman John Brodt confirmed the company is searching throughout the Northeast for replacement workers.

Delta pilots union files grievance against layoffs

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) at Delta Airlines filed a grievance opposing the company’s decision to lay off 1,700 pilots. The association cited a no-furlough clause in its recent contract.

Delta is claiming the “force majeure” clause in the contract, in connection with the September 11 terror attacks, justifies its actions. The clause allows an airline to use exceptional and unforeseen events to override contract provisions.

“We believe Delta management has improperly invoked the force majeure provision of our contract,” declared Delta ALPA Chairman William C. Buergey. “This is underscored by the company’s decision to pay millions of dollars in shareholder dividends while putting pilots on the street,” he said.

Pilots to fight job cuts at Air Canada

The Air Canada Pilots Association (ACPA) is set to fight layoffs at the country’s largest air carrier, which has said it will cut hundreds of jobs for pilots unless they agree to help reduce labor costs. The ACPA says they will fight any job cuts with existing contract protections.

Although the union has job guarantees built into their existing contract, that did not prevent the airline from attempting layoffs for over a thousand workers who had similar protections under Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) contracts. That move was defeated in a recent ruling by the

Canadian Industrial Relations Board, which led to a deal between the CAW and the airline for reduced job losses in exchange for cuts in work hours.

Air Canada was already in financial trouble prior to September 11, but like the airline industry in general, has faced a dramatic loss of revenue since that time. While the government has extended no measures to assist workers facing job losses, it has indicated a willingness to extend financing to shield the airline from bankruptcy.

Steelworkers vote hampered by new Ontario laws

A three-year-old battle for union certification at a steel company in Toronto has gone down to the wire due to new anti-union legislation brought in by the Conservative government of Mike Harris. Facing illegal action by the employer which would have previously meant automatic certification, the United Steelworkers has hinged their fight on excluding a single vote which is preventing union representation at the plant.

Baron Metal north of Toronto was able to achieve a tie in a vote by 100 production workers in 1998 by hiring two known criminals to intimidate workers. The company’s actions were ruled illegal by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) last May, but under new rules for unionization that merely meant that a second vote would determine the outcome with no penalty to the employer. The union has argued that the vote they want excluded belongs to a worker who is not a member of the bargaining unit.

Baron Metal, which manufactures metal doors at the plant, is a subsidiary of Royal Group Technologies Ltd. and is one of the largest industrial employers in the Toronto area. If the OLRB rules that the single ballot should be counted, it will mean the vote was tied and yet another vote must be held.



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