

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 November 2001

Argentine university professors strike

On November 9, university teachers across Argentina carried out a 24-hour protest strike against the government's economic adjustment and wage cuts.

The strike was almost total in the cities of Santiago del Estero, Mar del Plata, San Luis and Rio Cuarto and in the industrial centers of Rosario and Cordoba. In Buenos Aires and other cities participation varied from 40 to 70 percent of the teachers.

The instructors are planning further actions together with other teachers unions. They are demanding that the federal wage cuts be restored, the zero government deficit plan be scrapped and emergency funds be provided for education.

Argentine truck drivers protest

For two days, over 1,000 Argentine truck drivers blockaded the trans-Andean tunnel between Argentina and Chile at Las Cuevas and the highways between Brazil and Argentina at Paso de Los Libres and Foz de Iguazu.

Union leader Hugo Moyano organized the blockade to protest the use of Chilean and Brazilian trucks to make deliveries inside Argentina.

After complaints from the Chilean and Brazilian governments, the truckers lifted their blockade on November 10 following negotiations with the De la Rúa administration. Moyano said that the government accepted that 50 percent of regional trucking would be done by Argentine drivers.

Garbage strike in Buenos Aires

On November 8, refuse haulers in Buenos Aires went on strike in solidarity with 4,500 trash haulers in Buenos Aires Province who began a work stoppage on November 6. The provincial drivers are demanding a month and a half's worth of back pay.

The refuse workers had postponed a job action before the congressional elections two weeks ago, under assurances that they would be paid immediately after the vote. Authorities now say that the province cannot pay the workers until it receives federal funds. Buenos Aires Province is in the midst of a dispute over tax disbursements from the federal government.

Venezuelan oil workers strike

On November 9, Venezuelan oil workers carried out a 12-hour strike against a new government oil law. Oil and natural gas workers are demanding that the government cancel the new law, which threatens their benefits and divides the national oil company into oil and gas companies.

The strike by the 20,000 workers took place in the midst of rumors of unrest in the Venezuelan military, controversial elections within the Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV) and street clashes between supporters and opponents of the government of Hugo Chavez.

Union leaders warned that if their grievances were not addressed, the oil workers would initiate a series of protests this week.

VW to lay off 3,000 in Brazil

The German auto giant Volkswagen AG announced on November 8 that it will lay off 3,000 workers, blaming the union leaders for rejecting a proposal for a 15 percent reduction in wages and hours. VW claims that the cuts were needed in the face of an industry-wide slump.

The announcement came after the collapse of a two-week round of negotiations between the ABC Metal Workers Union and VW

management. The layoffs will take place on November 12, centering at the Anchieta plant, where 16,000 workers are currently employed.

ABC Metal Workers Union leaders said that they were willing to accept cuts and had made alternate proposals.

Since July auto sales have slumped as a result of high interest rates and a weak Brazilian currency, which undermined consumer confidence. October sales were 15 percent lower than a year ago; output fell by 13 percent. During the same period, auto prices went up 9 percent.

Furthermore VW has indicated that new technologies being used at its Sao Bernardo plant make many workers redundant.

The ABC union announced that its members will go on strike beginning November 12 against the layoffs.

VW announced that it is also negotiating a concessions package from the workers at its Taubate plant, north of Sao Paulo, threatening to lay off another 1,000 workers at that location if cuts are not accepted. VW employs about 27,000 workers in Brazil.

Colombian students, professors protest assassinations

Last week hundreds of university students and professors mobilized throughout Colombia in response to the assassination of students at the University of Antioquia in Medellin and the National University in Bogota.

Students and teachers marched and rallied in Bogota, Medellin, Neiva, Manizales and other cities.

On November 7 a student was gunned down during a demonstration at the National University. University officials claim that the shot came from the police. The next day in Medellin a student and an alumnus were gunned down during a chess game at the University of Antioquia.

Meanwhile union workers of the judicial branch in Colombia voted to strike November 5 against increasing violence against their members. Workers denounced the government's indifference to a wave of threats and assassinations of union activists

Chilean transit workers strike

On November 8, bus drivers on the San Bernardo Santiago route went on strike over working conditions. Over 400 buses were parked that serve four urban routes in metropolitan Santiago.

The workers, whose pay is based on bus revenues, are demanding improvements in the formula that links their wages to fare collections, two company-paid uniforms each year and four paid days off each month.

Chilean salmon workers on hunger strike

A hundred salmon workers in the southern port city of Puerto Montt, Chile began a hunger strike on November 7 to press for a 10 percent raise, rejecting the government's proposed 1 percent raise.

Following negotiations with Catholic Church officials, the workers agreed to move their protest from the Cathedral to another church facility. The Archbishop's Secretary Carlos Wagner declared that many of the workers have been accompanied by their families, including young children.

Also on hunger strike are five fishing workers from the Bio Bio region. They are part of a group that is occupying offices of the United Workers Central (CUT) in Santiago. On November 5, two of them had to be taken to a clinic for medical attention. The workers are protesting lack of progress in their negotiations with the government and have been at the

CUT for two and a half months.

Striking Missouri bus drivers to be replaced

Officials for two school districts in St. Charles County outside of St. Louis launched preparations to replace striking bus drivers. The decision came after negotiations between Teamsters Local 610 and the districts of Fort Zumwalt and Francis Howell broke down November 5.

The striking drivers are mainly opposed to the long progression that past contracts have required before drivers reach the highest wage level. Both groups of drivers start at \$9 an hour and must work 11 years before reaching the top rate of \$13.10 an hour. Fort Zumwalt drivers want a new top rate of \$14 an hour that can be reached after five years. Francis Howell drivers want a top rate of \$15 an hour, to be reached after two years.

The Howell school district's last offer was a top rate of \$14 an hour, but only after six years on the job. The district tried to sweeten the offer by adding a top wage of \$16.35 an hour after two years, but it would not kick in until the third year of the contract.

Portland city workers accept contract

Portland city workers voted by a 3 to 1 margin November 9 to accept a new contract containing concessions. The agreement came after workers launched a midnight strike October 21 that brought negotiations rapidly to a conclusion.

The agreement calls for a 19 percent cut in health benefits that overshadowed a minimum pay increase of 6.9 percent. Union officials pointed to the ongoing war in Afghanistan to justify the cuts. "This is not a contract that our members were thrilled with, by any stretch of the imagination," said Don Loving, who represents city workers. "We understand the world changed a little on September 11; Oregon is facing some tough individual economic times," he said.

Delta Flight attendants to vote on union

Flight attendants at Delta Air Lines will hold a union certification vote between December 7 and January 1. The Association of Flight Attendants won the right to seek representation for the airline's 20,000 flight attendants.

The National Mediation Board, a federal agency, will oversee the election. It has instituted a system whereby only flight attendants in favor of unionization will submit mail ballots and certification will only be granted if more than 50 percent of the total eligible bargaining unit members send in ballots.

The Association of Flight Attendants had sought a ballot whereby flight attendants would vote yes or no and certification would be granted based on obtaining the vote of 50 percent of those flight attendants participating in the election.

Class action suit charges New York Life with robbing pension funds

A US District Judge allowed New York Life Insurance Co. employees to pursue a class action suit that alleges the company robbed pension funds in order to launch a new line of mutual funds. The decision could potentially involve 50,000 workers.

The suit charges that the company raided pension and 401(K) funds in the late 1990s for capital to start MainStay Institutional Funds. It also claims New York Life levied excessive fees on employee investments and did not move the investments when they registered poor performances.

The lead plaintiff in the case, James Mehling, alleges he was fired in 1999 by New York Life over moves to expose the company's wrongdoing.

Quebec's Essential Services Council declares teacher protest illegal

Quebec's Essential Services Council has ordered public school and Cégep (junior college) teachers to immediately halt a series of pressure tactics aimed at forcing the provincial Parti Québécois (PQ) government to make good on a longstanding pledge to increase salaries to offset "gender wage-discrimination."

Last week, the 80,000 teachers stopped assigning homework to students.

The Quebec Trade Union Federation (CSQ) protest campaign further called for them to delay the issuing of report cards and provide supervision rather than instruction on two afternoons in the coming month.

Claiming that these nuisance tactics threatened student's right to an education, PQ Education Minister François Légal called on the province's Essential Services Council to declare the pressure campaign illegal. This it promptly did.

The CSQ leadership, which is a strong supporter of Quebec's PQ government, responded by abandoning its protest campaign. PQ Premier Bernard Landry hailed the CSQ's decision, declaring, "Teaching is also to give an example."

Several years ago the Quebec government committed itself to comparing the wage rates in jobs performed principally by women with those in which men predominate and to make adjustments to ensure gender wage equity. As a result, teachers were told that their wages would rise. Now the government is trying to renege on that commitment by re-designating the teachers as "part-time" employees.

Airline workers demand government action to prevent massive job losses

Hundreds of Canada 3000 workers marched on Toronto's Pearson Airport Friday to demand the federal Liberal government intervene to prevent the liquidation of the country's second largest air carrier and the elimination of 4,800 jobs.

On arriving at work that morning, Canada 3000 workers learned that the airline was ceasing all operations following the seizure of three of its planes by creditors.

In the days prior to the shutdown, union officials waived numerous contractual guarantees so that management could slash jobs and costs. The flight attendants' bargaining agent, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, agreed to the elimination of 500 jobs and wage cuts of between 5 and 7.5 percent, to help the company gain access to \$75 million in federal government credits.

But Canada 3000's owners argued that this was not enough. They petitioned the Canada Labor Relations Board to ask for the right to immediately terminate all pilots and flight attendants at the airline's Royal Aviation subsidiary. When this was refused, management sought bankruptcy protection, but by then some creditors were already moving to protect their interests by seizing company assets.



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