Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 November 2001

Unemployed protest in Argentina

On November 14 more than 2,000 unemployed workers from Argentina's interior set up barricades and rallied in Buenos Aires to denounce the free market economic policies of Economics Minister Domingo Cavallo. In addition, they called for subsidies for the unemployed, jobs and the release of two picket leaders detained in previous protests.

Barricades were also raised in the vicinity of the president's official residence, in the resort city of Mar Del Plata, and in the impoverished province of Jujuy in the country's northeast. The workers vowed to continue the struggle beginning next week.

VW strike in Brazil

Volkswagen workers at the Sao Bernardo do Campo plant in Brazil, on strike since November 12 against the company's decision to lay off 3,000 workers, are voting on a new agreement. While the layoffs have been rescinded, the ABC Metal Workers Union representing the auto workers agreed to pay cuts and the imposition of a shorter work week.

Company and union negotiators gave few details of a new five-year agreement. A VW spokesperson declared that the union had made "significant concessions" in return for the cancellation of the job cuts. Preliminary reports indicate that the wage cut will be about 15 percent. One provision says that 1,500 of the laid-off workers will be rehired immediately. The other 1,500 will be rehired this January. Until then they will be on paid leave.

VW workers earn about 1,600 reales a month, about US$630. In Germany VW workers make about US$2,000 a month. A 15 percent wage cut will bring their pay down to $550 with no reduction in hours. VW employs 26,800 workers in Brazil, 16,000 of them in Sao Bernardo.

Colombian bank workers to strike

Workers at Bancocolombia (CIB), the largest bank in Colombia, voted to strike in order to break an impasse in negotiations. Union sources report that 90 percent of the bank employees favor a strike, according to a vote taken on November 13. Two unions at the bank represent nearly 4,000 workers out of a total of 6,000.

Petroleum strike in Colombia

The Workers United Syndicate (USO) in Colombia reported that a four-day strike reduced oil production by 50 percent. The strike was launched on November 14 to protest the assassination and arrest of union workers and leaders. The workers also demanded that the government increase investments in the national oil company, Ecopetrol.

The immediate cause of this job action was the execution of an Ecopetrol worker in the northern city of Puerto Perales by right-wing death squads. His was the second assassination in less than a month. A USO spokesperson stated that the authorities treat union members as if they were criminals.

Two weeks ago the district attorney ordered the arrest of six USO leaders, accused of having ties with the National Liberation Army (ELN). Only one has been released so far. The others are still in custody. The six were arrested based on accusations by hooded witnesses.

Chilean brewery workers strike against wage cuts

Five hundred brewery workers in Santiago have struck against the United Beer Companies (CCU) to demand the firm not cut their monthly wages to 120,000 pesos (US$175) a month. Currently some of the workers earn 250,000 pesos.

On November 15 workers had been told that there would be a wage adjustment, and most initially assumed that this meant a raise. As news of the cut spread, third-shift workers walked out and the other shifts refused to enter the plant. It is expected that the strike will involve 3,000 workers. Management has threatened to replace the strikers with workers from a nearby bottling plant.

Argentine workers appeal for solidarity

Ceramic workers from Neuquen, Argentina have launched an appeal for international solidarity to support their month-long strike against Ceramica Zanon, the biggest producer of porcelain products in South America. The strike is in defense of jobs and against the plant closure. Four hundred jobs would be destroyed. The appeal states that 20 percent of the region's workers are unemployed.

Initially the workers had taken over the plant with the intention of continuing production, but were prevented from doing so when the government cut off the flow of natural gas. The strikers, members of an independent union, are demanding the plant's immediate reopening.

Missouri school districts file NLRB complaints against striking bus drivers

Officials for two school districts outside St. Louis, Missouri filed labor complaints against striking Teamsters bus drivers for picketing outside so-called "job fairs" set up to recruit temporary replacement drivers. "We want the pickets removed," declared Fort Zumwalt Superintendent Bernard DuBray.

Drivers for both Fort Zumwalt and Frances Howell school districts in St. Charles County struck to oppose present contracts, which set starting pay at $9 an hour and require drivers to work 11 years before reaching top pay of $13.10 an hour. Fort Zumwalt drivers want a new top rate of $14 an hour that can be reached after five years, while Francis Howell drivers want a top rate of $15 an hour within two years.

First Student, the company that contracts with the school district to provide busing, has also issued letters to striking drivers warning they will be permanently replaced if they don't return to

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work. Drivers are advised to resign from the union before attempting to reclaim their jobs.

***Chicago Sun-Times* staff issues strike authorization**

Reporters and editors for the *Chicago Sun-Times* newspaper voted 90-4 to authorize a strike after 19 bargaining sessions in three months failed to produce an acceptable agreement. The Chicago Newspaper Guild cites as the critical issues wages and the fact that 25 percent of their membership has been cut since 1994. Current Guild membership at the paper is 192.

The Guild is bargaining for wage increases of 6 percent in the first year and 5 percent in the second and third years of the new labor proposal. *Sun-Times* management is offering what the Guild calls a "slap in the face"—a four-year contract with only 1 percent increases in the first and third years. For a starting reporter, the current weekly salary is $591. For a reporter with five years experience it is $1,182.

Jeep workers voting to strike over long hours at Toledo plant

Auto workers at DaimlerChrysler AG's Toledo Jeep plant are expected to overwhelmingly issue a strike authorization vote on health and safety issues to protest long working hours. Due to the popularity of the new Jeep Liberty, workers are putting in 10 hours a day with additional time on Saturday.

The company's new $1 billion plant opened last April and has produced over 100,000 Liberty sport utility vehicles. The company has rejected a union proposal to open up a third shift at the plant. Some 800 members of the United Auto Workers are presently laid off from their jobs at the plant.

Meatpacker IBP ordered to pay $3 million to workers

A federal judge ruled that IBP meat processing company must pay $3 million to 815 workers at the company's Pasco, Washington plant because IBP did not pay the workers for time spent putting on protective equipment before shifts and during clean up at the end of the day.

IBP officials continue to insist they properly compensate workers and they plan to appeal the decision. According to Corrie Yackulic, attorney for the workers, the success at the Washington plant may lead to similar lawsuits at other IBP facilities.

In a separate suit, Washington state IBP workers are also seeking compensation for using lunch hour time to remove protective gear so they do not have to eat while covered with blood and other animal remains. Lawyers for the workers are still seeking $2.4 million in fees from IBP for the lawsuit. A hearing is scheduled for late November to decide the issue. IBP is owned by Tyson Foods Inc., the nation's largest meat processing conglomerate.

New York janitors reach agreement

Management for the New York real estate industry and the union representing 30,000 janitors reached a tentative three-year agreement November 13, some seven weeks before the expiration of the current contract. The real estate industry has reportedly made limited concessions to workers in order to avoid the threat of a strike or other disruptions for Manhattan's commercial tenants. The union bureaucracy has embraced the offer, claiming it is an unprecedented retreat by management.

Janitors, handymen and elevator operators are to receive a 9.5 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement. Company health insurance contributions will increase by more than $1,000 per worker per year and management declined to press for an increase in the square footage each janitor is required to clean.

The contract has little to do with any concern for the well being of janitors but rather the condition of the real estate industry. Manhattan's real estate vacancy rate is rising with more businesses contemplating leaving the area. Michael Fishman, president of the Local 32B-32J of the Service Employees International Union, said, "With the instability in the market and people packing up for the suburbs, stability is very important, and this contract helps achieve stability."

Auto Workers get contract at Magna

The Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) has signed a contract with the giant auto parts manufacturer Magna International to represent workers at a Windsor, Ontario factory. The plant will become the company's only unionized facility in Canada.

The three-year deal ratified last week will organize over 700 workers at the Integram seat-making plant in Windsor and sets a precedent for further union contracts among Magna's 19,000 Canadian employees. The CAW has tried for years to get a contract against fierce resistance by Magna, the country's largest independent part manufacturer. The CAW urged DaimlerChrysler, a major purchaser of Magna products, to pressure the company to unionize its facilities.

In order to win the deal the CAW agreed to give up the workers' right to strike for six years. The company has said it will not lock out the workers during this time. The deal provides for wage increases of 13.1 percent over three years and a signing bonus of $1,000 as well as improved benefits.

Montreal teachers on illegal strike

In defiance of a recent court ruling, 7,300 teachers at the largest school board in Montreal voted to walk off the job Monday, November 19 over pay equity and other issues in ongoing contract talks.

While teachers unions across the province are in the process of obtaining strike mandates from their members, Montreal teachers voted to take action immediately following a ruling by the Essential Services Council, declaring their pressure tactics illegal. Quebec teachers, who are in contract negotiations with the government, had launched a campaign of refusing to assign homework or prepare report cards.

While it is unclear how long the walkout will last, the leadership of the Alliance des Professeures et Professeurs de Montréal, which represents the striking teachers, said they will withhold services for at least three days. A principal issue in the dispute is the government depriving teachers of the rights of full-time workers. School officials claim that since teachers work 35 hours a week instead of 40, they should not be considered full-time employees. Striking teachers could face fines of up to $5,000 a day and up to a year in jail for defying the recent ruling.

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