Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 November 2001

Workers oppose job cuts at Peruvian Airlines

Peruvian Airlines mechanics at the company's Chilean hangars carried out a work slowdown to demand payment of their September salaries and oppose the sacking of 250 employees last week. The severely indebted company had already carried out 200 layoffs. Only 88 employees are left in Chile, out of 609 there last July. Hector Munoz, leader of the national airline workers union, said that the announcement came during a bargaining session over the payment of back wages and social security taxes owed to each worker.

VW union in Brazil accepts pay cuts, ends strike

On November 21 workers at the second largest Volkswagen plant in the world, at Sao Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, accepted a 15 percent wage cut and cuts in their working hours. The wage cut, negotiated by the ABC Metalworkers union, was presented as an alternative to the layoff of 3,000 workers and used to end the two-week strike by 16,000 workers against the job cuts.

Under the agreement, the company agreed not to lay off workers for five years. However, the more than 700 workers are expected to accept the company's "voluntary" early retirement offer. Those workers will not be replaced.

As part of its effort to push through the wage cuts VW announced plans to move production of its Golf model from the Brazilian plant to its Puebla, Mexico facility. The company reportedly abandoned, at least for the present time, a plan to lay off six percent of its personnel annually and replace them with new workers earning 30 percent less.

An economic downturn in Brazil and the Mercosur Common Market have reduced the demand for cars. In addition plant modernizations have sharply increased productivity, with far fewer workers needed per unit produced. Workers at the Sao Bernardo plant have undergone a series of job and wage cuts over the last five years. Employment at the plant once totaled 35,000 workers, more than the 26,800 workers than VW currently employs at its five Brazilian plants. In 1998 workers accepted a 20 percent wage reduction.

Miners buried in Colombia

On November 22 at 7:00 a.m., hundreds of tons of mud trapped a group of gold miners in western Colombia. Twenty-seven are confirmed dead. The early morning mudslide took place in the Amapola gold mine, near the city of Filadelfia, in the Department of Caldas, 200 kilometers west of Bogota. The workers were digging at an abandoned mineshaft that was depleted of commercial reserves.

Hundreds of impoverished miners, sometimes accompanied by their families, comb over abandoned mines along the Cauca River and its tributaries in the region. Typically they barely earn enough to live at a subsistence level. Many once worked for mining companies that abandoned the region.

Eyewitnesses report that more than 200 workers were in the mine when the side of the mountain slid down. More than 60 were trapped and presumed dead, together with some of their rescuers. As of November 25, 47 bodies had been recovered, totally covered in mud. By some estimates the final toll will exceed 100. "No survivors will be found," declared a government spokesman.

Missouri bus drivers reject latest proposals, continue strike

School bus drivers for two districts near St. Louis rejected proposals last week and continue to walk picket lines. Some 350 drivers for both Francis Howell and Fort Zumwalt school districts have been on strike since early October against First Student, a British-owned subsidiary, which contracts to provide bus service for some 26,000 students in the two districts.

School officials responded to the vote by indicating that they saw no possible resolution to the strike for the remainder of the year. The districts themselves are mounting an attempt to replace drivers while leasing buses from First Student. So far, however, Francis Howell has only 10 replacement workers, all of who are in training, and Fort Zumwalt has eight drivers in training of which one might be ready for service.

The bus drivers, members of Teamsters Local 610, struck to oppose present contracts that have starting pay of $9 an hour and an 11-year progression before drivers can reach top pay of $13.10 an hour. The company persists in trying to maintain extended wage progressions through contract wording.

Boston hotel workers take strike vote

Hotel workers at eight major Boston hotels voted to authorize a strike November 19 as negotiations between the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 26 head for a December 1 contract deadline.

"We're in negotiations and the talks are not proceeding well," said Local 26 President Janice Loux. According to the union the current offer would drastically cut health benefits and bankrupt the union's health insurance fund in a few years. Shifts would be reduced and the eight-hour day eliminated. At the same time, hotel management could demand mandatory overtime.

Local 26 represents 3,000 workers at 13 hotels in Boston and Cambridge. More than one-third of the membership has been laid off since the events of September 11.

Contracts ratified by Minnesota state employees

Minnesota's two largest state employees unions announced ratification of last October's tentative labor agreements that brought the largest strike in state history to a close. With more than half the strikers boycotting the vote, the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE) reported 81 percent in favor while five out of six units of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 6 approved by an 82 percent margin. Only state prison guards rejected the contract.

During the walkout workers faced a barrage of attacks from the media and Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura for striking in the wake of the September 11 events. Ventura mobilized the National Guard and used them as strikebreakers at state hospitals and nursing homes. But at the end of two weeks state operations were in danger of collapse. So serious was the situation that after the strike Governor Ventura proposed making strikes by state employees illegal.

At the end of the second week on strike, AFSCME and MAPE caved in, accepted the tentative agreement and sent strikers back to work. After having seen the union leadership surrender their strong position workers were so bitter that most refused to vote on the contract.

The agreements are not final. The full state legislature must approve the contract and key state Republicans are opposed to a new measure that provides medical and dental benefits to employees who have gay and lesbian partners. Minnesota businesses fear that the state contract could set a precedent that would place pressure on corporations to make the same concessions to their employees.

New York grocers pay back wages

Under an agreement with the state attorney general three New York City greengrocers, agreed to pay $315,000 in back wages to 31 workers. The state's case began 18 months ago in response to the stores' policy of underpaying the largely immigrant workforce.

East Natural, Soho Natural and Jack & Jane Corporation, all located in Lower Manhattan, were accused of forcing workers to labor up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week and paying them as little as $2.61 an hour when New York's minimum wage is $5.15 an hour.

The problem of cheating immigrant and undocumented workers out of pay and other abuses is widespread in New York. Attorney General Elliot Spitzer gave an insight into this practice, saying, "More important than the $315,000 is that these defendants, these owners, had been the most vocal opposition to our industry-wide effort to get greengrocers to abide by labor law mandates. They were the folks who were saying, 'We will not comply.'"

Immigrants vote to join electricians union

East European electricians, recruited by an American company for temporary work in the United States, voted unanimously to join the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) after it was exposed that they were being paid half the wages of union electricians.

USA-IT contracted to bring 700 electricians to the United States from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and other Eastern European countries. The company only paid the workers $10 an hour and profited by collecting $5 an hour from electric contractors for every hour the electricians worked. In addition, the workers complained that USA-IT deducted significant sums of money from their paychecks for travel, housing and other expenses.

The IBEW will now enter into negotiations with USA-IT to reach a labor agreement covering the foreign workers. The workers originally entered the United States under a J-1 visa program that allows them to stay and work for eighteen months.

Last Cape Breton coal mine closes

Nearly three hundred years of coal mining in the Cape Breton region of Nova Scotia has come to an end with the shutting of the Prince mine last week. It also marks the end of government run DEVCO Corporation, which has been liquidating its mining operations in the province over the last several years.

At one time the pits in Cape Breton employed as many as 10,000 workers, but by last week that number had dropped to only 270. Workers have been embroiled in numerous battles to protect their jobs in recent years, but their union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), has largely restricted their efforts to improved layoff provisions. The final severance package is far short of that received by workers in previous rounds of layoffs, leaving these workers without pensions. Their dire situation prompted a donation from the Canadian Union of Public Employees of over $100,000 last week.

The federal government has been losing money for more than 30 years through its coal mining interests at DEVCO. The collapse of the industry has devastated the region, which has consistently posted a rate of over 20 percent unemployment, and offers only low wage employment in growth industries such as call centers for the thousands of displaced miners.

Quebec teachers battle for pay equity

Seven thousand teachers in Montreal ended their three-day work stoppage last week. The teachers union could face a fine of up to $50,000 for the walkout, which is illegal under Quebec law. The return to work came just as the provincial Treasury Board announced it would postpone, for one year, a settlement of the pay issue that prompted the job action.

Teachers have been fighting for 40 hours pay per week rather than the 35 hours the province has insisted on. The government's refusal to resolve the issue has prompted teachers to boycott a plan by Education Minister François Legault to overhaul teaching methods in the province. Last week over three hundred students at a high school in Laval staged a walkout in support of the teachers and further actions have been promised.

The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers, which represents 82,000 teachers in the province, has said that the pay equity fight may be linked to ongoing contract talks. They have also threatened that their campaign of pressure tactics will be intensified with the possible boycott of extracurricular activities in January.

BC unions file complaint against government

Three unions in British Columbia filed a complaint last week with the International Labor Organization (ILO) alleging non-compliance with international labor standards by the right-wing provincial government, headed by Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell. The unions cite two new laws that allow the government to impose contracts on nurses and make education an "essential service," thereby prohibiting strikes by teachers and other school employees. The ILO, which is a UN agency, has no real authority in such issues and the action is primarily a publicity stunt aimed at embarrassing the government. Meanwhile, the provincial government recently announced it plans to cut up to one third of all government jobs over the next three years.