# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**4 December 2001**

**Thousands strike in Peru against unemployment**

On November 27, thousands of workers began a strike in the Peruvian cities of Pucallpa and Tarapoto, northwest of the capital city of Lima, demanding that the government provide jobs to the region.

A strike of indefinite duration at Pucallpa and of 48 hours at Tarapoto was organized by the Committee to Defend the Interests of the Department of Uayali. It appears that most of the inhabitants are participating in the job action.

The committee is demanding that the government pave regional roads, build a port on the Ucayali River and reorganize the University of Pucallpa. It is also demanding that Pucallpa be connected to the national electricity network to bring down the cost of electrical power and that the region's agricultural infrastructure be upgraded.

**Transport strike in Bolivia**

On November 28, transit bus drivers carried out a 24-hour national strike across Bolivia. The executive secretary of the Bolivian Confederation of Bus Drivers (CCHB) said that the strike was solid across the nation. Drivers are angry that the government has signed but is ignoring five contracts, which include measures to strengthen the industry and to raise drivers' pay.

Workers rallied in the city of Santa Cruz. There were confrontations with the police in La Paz. The city of Cochabamba was under military occupation the entire day.

**Colombian oil workers shut down refinery**

On November 30, petroleum workers protesting the kidnapping of one of their union leaders shut down the Ecopetrol refinery in Cartagena on the Colombian Caribbean Coast.

Fascist paramilitary death squads kidnapped Aury Sara Marrugo, president of the Workers Union (USO) in Central Cartagena. Three vehicles intercepted Marrugo and his bodyguard, kidnapping both of them. Angry workers then entered the refinery and shut it down.

USO National President Hernado Hernandez said that the USO leaders had been stalked and received threatening phone calls for over 20 days. He also reported that two months ago local police had warned Ecopetrol management that there were plans to assassinate USO leaders.

Furthermore, Hernandez reported that motorcycle police had been seen following the suspect's car until just before the kidnapping.

**Police attack ceramic strikers in Argentina**

Argentine workers on strike for more than three months at Ceramica Zanon, one of the largest porcelain and tile factories in South America, were brutally attacked November 30 during a protest against the closing of the facility and for past due wages.

In spite of a court ruling stating the company was guilty of carrying out an "offensive lockout," and an agreement that workers would receive their September and October salaries, on November 30 the company closed the plant and sent redundancy notices to 380 workers.

Following a mass meeting held the same day, the workers marched to the provincial government building in Neuquén to protest. They burned their letters of dismissal, threw eggs at the building and burned tires on the streets. A confrontation erupted after police arrived with a water cannon and opened fire with tear gas and rubber bullets against the unarmed workers. Nineteen workers were arrested and nine injured. Two hours later Zanon workers assembled with their families and other trade unionists and more than 3,000 people marched through the city demanding the release of the arrested workers, who were later freed.

**Venezuelan teachers strike**

Teachers in the Venezuelan city of Sucre refused to stop their strike over back pay, even as municipal authorities scrambled to raise 542 million bolivares ($726,000) in back pay for the 1,300 striking teachers. The educators declared that this is only a fraction of the amount owed to them. They are also demanding that the city budget money to upgrade Sucre schools. The teachers contend that they are owed almost US$10 million.

Sucre's Education Director Yesenia Rodriguez agreed that the teachers are still owed a lot more, but declared that Sucre did not have the necessary funds. The mayor told the teachers that the city owes all its workers over $70 million.

**Juarez maquiladora sweatshops sack 52,000 workers**

So far this year 52,000 workers have been laid off from the maquiladora factories of Ciudad Juarez, the Mexican border city that faces El Paso, Texas. The job destruction is attributed to the US recession. Out of the 300 maquiladoras that operate in the city, 22 have closed their doors and another 120 have announced plans to further reduce their operations. Analysts expect that layoffs will be even higher in 2002. These plants assemble products from US components, taking advantage of poorly paid Mexican labor. The finished goods are then exported to the United States.

**Pratt & Whitney workers strike**

More than 5,000 workers set up picket lines Monday morning at four plants owned by the jet-engine maker Pratt & Whitney in Connecticut. The workers, members of the International Association of Machinists, walked out just after midnight after rejecting a new contract proposal that workers say doesn't provide sufficient job security.

A subsidiary of United Technologies Corp., Pratt & Whitney provides engines and spare parts to airlines and the military. To keep up with deliveries, the company has begun assigning between

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1,500 and 2,000 salaried employees to the empty positions, said company spokesman Mark Sullivan. Pratt & Whitney supplies the US military with engines and parts for F-15 and F-16 fighter planes, B-52 bombers and C-17 transport planes.

Union officials said Sunday they discussed the military situation in Afghanistan but decided a walkout would not significantly affect the war effort, said James Parent, union spokesman. US Rep. John B. Larson (D-Conn.), planned to meet Monday with union members and company officials to urge a quick resolution to the strike. “We are at war,” Larson told a local newspaper. “It’s in the best interest of everyone they get back to the negotiating table.”

The company offered a contract that included a 10 percent pay raise over three years, but union members said the contract did not promise enough job security, leaving open the possibility that projects could be moved out of state. Pratt employs about 13,000 people in Connecticut, 7,000 fewer than in the early 1990s.

“Pratt can’t guarantee anyone a job,” Sullivan said. “The world’s just too uncertain a place now to make that claim.”

**New York nurses strike Long Island hospital**

Over 450 nurses struck St. Catherine of Siena Medical Center on New York’s Long Island November 25 after negotiators failed to resolve staffing and health coverage issues. Management is attempting to run the center using 105 replacement nurses supplied by the Denver-based US Nursing Corporation that specializes in strikebreaking.

The New York State Nurses Association, which represents the striking nurses, charges the hospital is running the 273-bed facility with inadequate staffing levels. Union spokesperson Anne Schott told the *New York Times*, “They have a policy of running the hospital at absolute minimum staffing, so if someone gets sick you have a huge problem.” Should a disagreement about staffing arise in the future, the union is proposing immediate arbitration by a third party. The hospital advocates an in-hospital committee, something that the union sees as a way to stonewall the issue and creating a situation where “talk goes on forever.”

Management is opposing the union’s proposal to pull its members out of the hospital’s health plan, Catholic Health Services of Long Island, and enroll them in the union’s health plan. The move would cost the hospital about $500,000 more per year while saving each nurse more than $1,000 per year.

**Teachers’ assistants strike University of Illinois**

Graduate teaching assistants at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign conducted a two-day strike November 28 and 29 to demand the right to bargain over economic and work issues. Some 375 teaching assistants canceled classes, office hours, and refrained from grading papers.

Strikers picketed a group of five campus teaching facilities that provide lecture space for freshman and sophomore students. Many professors responded by either canceling classes or moving to off-campus locations to avoid crossing picket lines. About 4,000 undergraduate students had their classes canceled during the two-day work stoppage.

University management showed no inclination of budging from its refusal to bargain. University spokesman Bill Murphy declared, “A stoppage isn’t going to change people’s minds.” One striker, Storm Heter, told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “If we’re doing the same work as professors, and we are, then we should be entitled to form a union and bargain a contract.” The Graduate Employees Organization, which is leading the unionization effort, says it will call more work stoppages to continue to pressure for bargaining rights.

On campuses across the United States graduate students have been seeking unionization as a way of trying to maintain minimum living standards. Universities look upon graduate students as a form of cheap labor to be exploited. At the University of Illinois teaching assistants receive free tuition along with an average stipend of about $13,000 during the course of the present school year.

**Strike looms at Canadian Broadcasting Corporation**

Due to an impasse in contract talks, 1,600 workers at the government-owned radio and television network Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) are set to strike. The technicians involved are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) who work at the English language television and radio services of CBC. The threatened strike action was taken in response to the employer’s imposition of new terms of employment over the head of the union. They provide for a lump sump payment of $500 and an immediate wage increase of 1.5 percent. The CEP leadership has called the move tantamount to a lockout and gave the required 72 hours notice for strike action to begin December 3 if a deal was not reached before then.

The workers have been without a contract since last June. Subsequent conciliation ended in an impasse in early November. The resulting 21-day cooling-off period ended last week, but CBC negotiators have not moved from their November offer. Negotiations continued through the weekend.

**British Columbia teachers increase job action**

Teachers across British Columbia will be withdrawing services as part of a limited job action, which has been going on for a month. What has amounted to a work-to-rule campaign, with teachers refusing to meet with parents or write report cards, will extend to the elimination of coaching, band practice and drama in their ongoing battle with the right-wing provincial government.

The BC Teachers Federation have sought permission from the Labour Relations Board to broaden their actions and have threatened more traditional strike measures if no progress is made in contract talks. Teachers have been without a contract since June and have faced new laws enacted by the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell limiting their right to strike. The government has offered a 7.5 percent wage increase over three years but teachers are asking for a total of 22 percent over the same period.

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