

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Unemployed seize food from Argentine supermarkets

For the first time since 1989, unemployed workers and their families are taking food from supermarkets in Rosario, Argentina's third largest city. Rosario is the city with the highest percentage of unemployed workers, 23 percent. Similar events are going on in the Andean city of Mendoza, Argentina's fourth largest, and in Avellaneda, an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires.

Rosario municipal authorities declared that these are not overtly political acts. "Undoubtedly these requests [for food] took place out of necessity and not out of a mobilization," said Antonio Bonfatti, Rosario's government secretary.

On Friday, December 14, 30 people took bags of food from a supermarket. On the same day, 70 others emptied out a delivery truck. When police attempted to intervene, they were driven off by rock-throwing residents.

Identical scenarios occurred in Mendoza on December 13, when 100 jobless workers assembled to demand food. On Saturday, scores of poor women and children peacefully entered two supermarkets and took basic foodstuffs. On the same day in Avellaneda, 250 unemployed occupied a supermarket for three hours. They left once management promised milk, sugar, tomatoes, pasta, flour, potatoes and other food for 500 people.

Similar seizures of meat, vegetables, milk, rice and noodles took place during the hyperinflation of 1989, contributing to the collapse of the administration of President Raul Alfonsin. Argentina is suffering from its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The official October unemployment figures indicate that 18.3 percent of the labor force is unemployed.

Latin Americans abandoning search for nonexistent jobs

The Bloomberg news service reports that Latin American workers are increasingly giving up looking for jobs, convinced that none are available. Altogether, 1.4 million workers have given up looking for work this year, according to the International Labor Organization. Since 1997, the number of people between the ages of 16 and 65 who are either working or searching for a job has shrunk by 3.3 million, or 1.5 percent. So-called discouraged workers are not included in the official jobless rate of these countries.

"Throughout Latin America, we're seeing this hidden unemployment," said Ricardo Infante, who heads the ILO's office in Chile, which covers the lower half of South America. The decline in the workforce helps explain why the official unemployment rate in Latin America was unchanged at 8.3 percent in the first nine months, compared with the same period last year, even as economies in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and other countries slowed, the ILO said. Counting discouraged workers, the actual unemployment rate region-wide exceeds 10 percent.

Teachers strike in the Dominican Republic

Thousands of public school teachers went on a two-day strike beginning December 13 over wages. The teachers are demanding a budget increase for education next year plus the payment of back wages and a wage increase. The strike was nearly total throughout the Dominican Republic.

United Airlines mechanics authorize strike

Machinists at United Airlines have voted by a 99 percent margin to authorize a strike after two years of negotiations failed to produce a tentative agreement. The 15,000 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) are bitter, having watched other sections of airline workers achieve industry-leading contracts only to be told by airline management that they must make concessions in the wake of the events of September 11.

United has cut 20,000 jobs and about 750 daily flights since the terror attacks. It lost \$1.16 billion in the third quarter and claims to be presently losing \$15 million on a daily basis. United's chief executive, John Creighton, showed union officials the company's financial ledgers in order to make a case for necessity of concessions.

When the Machinists union rejected an arbitration offer in November, President Bush stepped in to make clear he would not tolerate a strike by the mechanics. Fortified by this declaration, United declined to make the IAM an offer.

A legally mandated cooling-off period is set to expire December 21, which would free the machinists to strike. But one day after the strike vote White House spokesman Ari Fleischer renewed Bush's opposition to a walkout: "The president has made it clear that given the fragility of the airline industry and the importance of the American people's right to travel, he would look very unkindly on any

action that would interfere with those rights.”

By calling for the appointment of a presidential emergency board Bush could bar the IAM from striking for an additional 60 days, pushing back a possible strike until the latter part of February.

Pratt & Whitney strike ends

The one-and-a-half-week strike by about 5,100 workers against Pratt & Whitney jet engine factories in Connecticut ended last week when workers ratified the company’s last contract offer. Members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace (IAM) voted to end the strike by a vote of 2,954 to 999.

Despite the vote many workers were disappointed with the final agreement, but decided it was better to end the strike than maintain picket lines for an unpredictable period of time. Some openly jeered and shouted in disgust when the final vote tally was announced. One union activist, upon hearing of the vote result, screamed at the union leaders, “They [the company] gave us nothing—nothing” before storming out of the room.

A subsidiary of United Technologies Corp., Pratt & Whitney produces engines and spare parts for commercial airlines and the military. Mark Sullivan, a spokesman for company, said they would not offer anything more than the final offer. At the same time Sullivan said the company was concerned that the walkout would have had severe consequences if the strike had continued into January.

The contract provides for a 10 percent wage increase over three years. However, one of the most contentious issues of the strike was job security. According to union spokesmen, the company promises to maintain more than 600 jobs at the Cheshire plant and would not lay off the more than 100 workers at the New Haven plant scheduled to close. The company also promised that the production of its new F119 engine for fighter aircraft would be kept in Connecticut.

Many workers were also upset over the final retirement package, which requires the company to make a monthly pension contribution of \$44 per month. The union demand was for \$65 per month. It is well known fact that Pratt & Whitney retirees simply cannot survive on the current pension plan and eventually fall into poverty.

Pilots union and Delta agree on cost-cutting measure

Delta Airlines and its pilots’ union reached a tentative agreement December 14 that seeks to cut payroll costs for the Atlanta-based airline. The proposal will allow Delta pilots to schedule a month-long leave during which they would receive a payment equal to 55 hours of flying time.

Delta pilots won what was called by the airlines an industry-leading contract last May. Since September 11, Delta has laid off 13,000 workers in an effort to cut costs. The leaves of absence would be compensated at a rate lower

than standard pay, creating additional savings for the company.

Lockout of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation technicians continues

The lockout of 1,600 technicians at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) entered its second week on Monday, with widespread disruption of both television and radio programming across the country. Management has said they are trying to save \$6 million by eliminating penalties when technicians work consecutive shifts and by conducting other cost-cutting measures. Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) officials have now said they are willing to lower their demand for wage increases, from 14 percent over three years to 8.5 percent. CBC management has stuck to its last offer of 3.5 percent over two years. Negotiations have broken off since before the job action began on December 7.

Winnipeg Symphony locks out musicians

For the first time in its 54-year history, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra (WSO) locked out musicians last week after they unanimously voted to reject conditions of binding arbitration. The final offer from management contained provisions to extract up to \$400,000 from the musicians to make up for projected losses. Management is also seeking to lay off 2 of the 67 musicians and possibly reduce the season from 38 to 34 weeks. In addition, musicians would have faced a wage freeze this year with raises of 3 percent for the next two years. The Winnipeg Musicians Association has offered to drop three weeks of work through the year and allow three positions to remain unfilled.

The lockout comes in the midst of the Christmas season and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet says that they expect the musicians to honor their commitment to perform for its production of *Nutcracker* beginning December 21. The last contract for the musicians, which contained wage freezes for three years, expired at the end of August.



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