

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 January 2002

Transit strike in Sao Paulo

Transit strikes continue in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Last week drivers and ticket takers employed by two bus companies went on strike. Four hundred thirty buses belonging to the Formosa and Sao Judas Tadeu companies were idled. The strikers demanded the payment of the December bonus. Both Formosa and Sao Judas Tadeu connect the eastern suburbs with downtown Sao Paulo. SPTrans, the company that administers all of Sao Paulo's public transit, put an emergency plan in operation to provide alternate service. This is the latest in a series of transit strikes in Sao Paulo against nonpayment of wages and bonuses.

Record number of strikes in Venezuela for 2001

Venezuela had 744 strikes in the year 2001, according to statements by Police Commissioner Ivan Simonovis. On average there were 60 strikes each month.

Simonovis included in his count the civic strike of December 10, which was organized by right-wing corporate opponents to the regime of President Hugo Chavez. A number of trade unions joined that 24-hour protest. Chavez has compared himself with Chile's Allende, claiming that the country's oligarchy is searching for a Pinochet to replace him.

The nation's largest trade union, the Federation of Venezuelan Workers, announced it will launch yet another strike during the first few days of 2002. Venezuela's economy is floundering, with record amounts of financial capital leaving the country.

New York Catholic teachers end strike

Teachers on strike from nine Catholic schools in New York City and its northern suburbs narrowly voted on December 30 to end a walkout that began November 29. At the same time, the approximately 300 teachers rejected the contract offer from the Archdiocese of New York and their union claimed it might renew the strike in two weeks if the State Employment Relations Board does not decide the archdiocese negotiated in bad faith.

While the exact raises for salary and medical benefits offered by the archdiocese was not yet announced, the offer to increase matching funds for the teachers' tax-deferred annuity accounts was not acceptable to the teachers. The major strike issue was the pension plan. Teachers had demanded a second pension plan to supplement the present pension of only \$12,000. While the Lay Faculty Association, which represents the strikers, said there would be no cost to the archdiocese, school officials said they were concerned about future liabilities. The archdiocese has a \$20 million budget deficit and has closed three Catholic schools. The Catholic high school teachers' salaries range from \$29,893 to \$41,745, and even lower for elementary level teachers, compared to \$31,000 to \$70,000 for New York City public school teachers and as much as \$20,000 more in the suburbs.

Although the Catholic school strikers forced principals to close schools, schedule half days or open schools to only one grade per day, the walkout remained isolated. On December 11, the larger

3,200-member Federation of Catholic Teachers, which includes elementary as well as some high schools, accepted a more restrictive health care plan and an 11 percent pay raise over three years. The United Federation of Teachers, representing approximately 100,000 public school employees, took no action to defend the Catholic school teachers, despite the fact that UFT members at New York City public schools have not had a contract for over a year.

Resistance to benefit concessions, particularly as the recession deepens, was also at the center of the recent Middletown, New Jersey teachers strike, where school officials demanded teachers pay increased contributions to their health benefits. In that strike almost a quarter of the district's 1,000 teachers were jailed for defying a court injunction and were forced back to work with only a promise of mediation.

Tyson Foods charged in illegal use of undocumented workers

The US Justice Department handed down a 36-count indictment in December against Tyson Foods, charging the giant chicken processor with conspiracy to smuggle undocumented immigrants from Mexico to work at 15 plants in nine states.

The scheme is the result of a two-and-a-half-year undercover investigation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). It found Tyson executives Robert Hash, vice president of the retail fresh division, and Gerald Lankford, former human-resources manager, along with four former managers, were directly involved in the brutal transport of Mexican workers, many of whom died in passage, to low wage-sweatshop industries across the country. One manager told an undercover agent that the company would pay \$200 for each worker. The company also provided false documents and Social Security numbers for the workers to provide a legal cover for the exploitation of cheap labor recruits.

The INS probe investigated a total of 66 facilities, of which 40 were said to be employing undocumented workers. Discrepancies were found involving 20 percent of the 24,000 employment verification checks done by the INS from 1998 through 1999.

Convictions on charges of illegally importing immigrants for commercial advantage could lead to five-year mandatory prison sentences with no chance for parole. Tyson has tried to deflect the charges, claiming "the specific charges are limited to a few managers who were acting outside of company policy at five of our 57 poultry processing plants."

Tyson was an early financial backer of former president Bill Clinton. During the first Clinton administration, Archie Schaffer III, a former executive, was sentenced to a year in prison for illegally trying to influence former Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy.

Missouri bus strike concluded

Bus drivers at two Missouri school districts voted to accept partial contract gains and return to work after two months on strike against First Student, a British subsidiary that contracts with the districts for bus service. Drivers for the Francis Howell school district voted

109-21 to accept a five-year agreement and Fort Zumwalt district drivers accepted their contract by a 148-5 margin.

The strike originated in bus drivers' opposition to previous agreements that paid new hires \$9 an hour and contained wage progressions that denied them the top scale of \$13.10 an hour until their eleventh year on the job. Under the new agreements, pay scales will be ratcheted up in stages. In the first year, wages will range from \$9.50 to \$14 an hour. In the second year they will increase to a range of \$9.88 to \$14.50. During both years there will be six pay levels.

In the third and fourth years the pay scale will have two levels. The third year will see wages in the \$12.60 to \$16.30 an hour range and during the fourth year they will climb to \$13.10 to \$16.95 an hour. Francis Howell drivers have a fifth year in their contract, in which wages will increase to a range of \$13.76 to \$17.80 an hour. Insurance premiums for drivers will increase from 77 cents per week under the old contract to \$7.50 per week for individual workers.

The school districts attempted to break the bus drivers strike by mounting their own operation using replacement workers. But the effort failed. On December 3, some two months after the beginning of the strike, Fort Zumwalt managed for the first time to send out four buses that picked up a total of 30 students. About 130 buses are needed to transport the 26,000 students that attend school in the two districts.

Coal miners ratify contract

An unofficial tally claims 60 percent of the United Mine Workers of America members voted to ratify a five-year contract with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association. After years of mass layoffs and strikes betrayed by the UMWA leadership, only 26,000 miners covered by the contract are still working. The average age of a working miner is around 50. The other 74,000 UMWA members covered by the agreement are retired or laid off.

The UMWA and coal operators reached the agreement a full year before the December 2002 expiration of the current contract. Full details are not available, however the contract reportedly contains a \$1.50 an hour increase over the five-year agreement, a \$600 bonus—only for those miners employed as of July 2002—and a clause that is supposed to make it easier for miners with 30 years of service to retire with full benefits. Hourly pay rates currently range up to \$18. UMWA President Cecil Roberts called the agreement “a tremendous victory for UMWA members nationwide.” However, the Associated Press viewed the agreement as “giving the companies a measure of stability at an uncertain time for the global energy industry.”

Salt Lake airport workers protest detention

Representatives of 69 Hispanic workers at Salt Lake City International airport, who were detained following the September 11 attacks, threatened a statewide labor strike during the February Winter Olympics unless the workers are paid back wages. Some 40 of the immigrant workers are still in detention.

James Yapias, chairman for the Hispanic Advisory Council, charged 13 companies—including car rental agencies, airlines and construction companies—have withheld wages. US Attorney Paul Warner, who is involved in the detentions, declined an invitation to address workers and their families at a Salt Lake City rally.

Another 200 Latino workers employed in areas that are not considered high-security at the Salt Lake City airport were also fired but not charged or detained.

Lockout ends at CBC

The month long strike-lockout at the government-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) came to an end on December 21

when workers voted to accept a concessions contract recommended by their union.

The 1,600 technicians from radio and television operations across the country are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP). While the union had been seeking wage increases of 14 percent over three years, the contract contains only 5.5 percent over two years. More important is the union giveaway on disputed provisions for meal breaks between shifts, turnaround penalties and overtime rates.

The union leadership had anticipated the deal would be a “hard sell,” but recommended it to the membership with Vice President Peter Murdoch saying, “The very fabric of CBC journalism in regional centers was threatened if this continued much longer.” The agreement is retroactive to July of last year when the last contract expired. The locked-out technicians began their return to work on January 1.

Workers take wage cut at Algoma Steel

Employees at Algoma Steel Inc. in Sault Ste. Marie voted two weeks ago to accept a two-and-a-half-year contract containing wage cuts of 15 percent in a union bid to bail out the insolvent company, the third largest steel producer in Canada.

Nearly 4,000 members of the United Steelworkers are affected under the deal, which will also mean over 350 of them will lose their jobs. The USWA holds a 25 percent share in Algoma, which has become financially troubled since borrowing more than \$500 million to build a new steel mill that began construction in 1997.

The company has been under bankruptcy protection since last April and it is expected that the deal worked out with the union could forestall its collapse for the time being. The federal government had indicated that it might offer loan guarantees if an agreement could be reached between all parties concerned.

Supreme Court squelches ban on farm unions

The Supreme Court of Canada has overturned a key anti-union law passed by the Ontario Conservative government barring farm and agricultural workers from union organization.

The decision has been hailed by union leaders as a landmark in granting constitutional rights for trade union activity in a number of other employment sectors. Steven Barrett—attorney for the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the national governing body for unions—predicted that the ruling will mean other groups such as provincial workfare participants, and domestic workers who are similarly barred, will now be able to seek the same rights.

The litigants who pushed the case through the legal system are chicken-farm workers who, among others, were excluded from protection under reactionary changes to the provincial Labour Relations Act passed by the government of outgoing Ontario Premier Mike Harris. It is considered a significant ruling from the highest court in the land, which historically has not favored the trade union movement. The Ontario government has 18 months to repeal or amend its laws.



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