

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 January 2002

Argentine strikes and protests

Hospitals

Provincial hospital workers in Buenos Aires began a 24-hour strike on January 10 against the critical shortage of medicine and material they face in the wake of Argentina's December crisis. Seventy Buenos Aires hospitals on strike maintained only skeleton emergency crews.

Jorge Yabkowski, general secretary of the Buenos Aires Association of Health Professionals (ASPSBS), described the situation as a "sanitary emergency that keeps getting worse." Striking workers are also demanding that unpaid wages from December be paid for the 12,000 provincial health employees.

ASPSBS officials say that the medicine shortage, which includes a critical shortage of insulin, is due to price speculation by laboratories. An emergency shipment of Brazilian insulin took place last week to partially alleviate the crisis.

The unemployed

On December 10 in the southern city of Neuquen, 80 unemployed youth confronted police in a protest to demand jobs at an industrial park. In Huinul, Neuquen province, 130 families blocked a national highway and picketed to demand jobs. In Tucuman, in the Northwest, unemployed workers blocked several highways, demanding 2,000 jobs.

Public employees

In Santiago del Estero, more than 400 municipal workers burned tires and refuse in front of Senator Jose Zavalía's home, demanding back pay. The workers have protested for over eight weeks. Previously workers had disrupted the senator's press conference at a local hotel, forcing him to flee through the roof.

A mountain of refuse was also burned on December 8 in the Buenos Aires suburb on Lanus by garbage collection workers who have not been paid in weeks. In Mar Del Plata, 2,000 workers marched through the streets of the resort town. National University employees also protested in La Plata over December salaries and year-end bonuses.

In San Juan, federal workers struck and blocked public buildings in the city to press demands for back pay.

Transit strike

In Rosario, workers on 27 bus lines have been on strike since December 8. The drivers rejected a management offer that would have brought their pay up to date in stages. They are refusing to return to work until all their wages are paid in full.

In the northern city of Salta, striking bus drivers mobilized and rallied at City Hall, demanding three months unpaid wages.

Salvadoran health workers join protests

El Salvador's Public Health Ministry employees mobilized on December 10 to demand the rehiring of 1,200 government employees laid off by the current administration. President Francisco Flores insisted that the layoffs were necessary to make the government run more efficiently.

Union leaders claim that, while they do not oppose the layoffs, they consider them arbitrary, pointing out that union officials have been made the target of the firings. On January 1, 8,000 were sacked in one day. Previously another 6,000 had been let go. Flores claims that the government will save \$32 million through the layoffs.

Flores' plan now is to lay off workers who maintain the Health

Ministry's vehicles. Their work will be contracted to Star Motors, a company owned by Roberto Murray Meza, leader of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), according to union sources.

By the end of January health workers plan to expand their protests to involve 25 hospitals. The Health Ministry employs 18,000 workers in 30 hospitals.

Argentines protest new bank restrictions

On December 10, over 6,000 people rallied in front of the Government House in Buenos Aires, while many others banged pots and pans in neighborhood protests across this sprawling capital to protest harsh restrictions on access to their savings accounts. Protesters battled police and attacked banks and ATM machines.

Throughout Thursday night until dawn on Friday protesters denounced the Duhalde government's decision to freeze dollar-denominated accounts for a year, and peso-denominated accounts for at least two more months. The policy seeks to protect the banks from another run. Banks lost 25 percent of their deposits in 2001.

On Friday, banks were allowed to open for the first time since a peso devaluation was announced. The free market price for dollars immediately jumped to between 1.60 and 1.70 pesos to the dollar. The official price is pegged at 1.40 for exports and essential imports.

Protests in Paraguay

Hundreds of Paraguayans rallied on December 8 in Asuncion, banging pots across from the capital. The protesters demanded relief from the economic crisis that is afflicting the land-locked nation. Many warned that supermarkets would be looted if emergency measures were not taken. The organizers announced that beginning on December 13 they would establish soup kitchens in Asuncion to dramatize that many Paraguayans are going hungry.

Unemployment in Paraguay now stands at 20 percent. Factories and commerce are paralyzed, inflation is accelerating and crime is increasing.

New York bus workers carry out wildcat strike

About 1,500 bus drivers and mechanics who work for three private bus companies—Jamaica Buses, Triboro Coach, and Queens Surface Corporation—spontaneously walked off the job on January 7. Workers in two other Queens bus companies, Green and Command, engaged in a sympathy slowdown.

The walkout caught the leadership of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which represents the workers, by complete surprise. The union officials proceeded to do everything in their power to end the wildcat strike. As a result, the job actions that began at 5 a.m. came to an end before noon.

TWU Local 100 President Roger Toussaint visited the workers in each company and told them to return to work. Afterwards he told the press, "We had a very difficult time getting people back to work. People's frustration is really riding high."

One driver said, "I feel like we didn't get anything accomplished. My take is, we should've stayed out until we got what we wanted."

The workers have been without a contract since December 31, 2000. Two of their major demands concern wages and job security. The striking workers want pay parity with their counterparts in the public transportation system.

Toussaint has told the press that the union has given up on achieving parity because of the financial troubles of the bus companies and the city. The workers are also demanding that they have job security even if the city does not renew the franchise to the private companies for which they work.

Toussaint became president of the union a little more than a year ago when he ran at the head of the New Directions slate that overwhelming defeated the old entrenched and corrupt leadership in a local-wide election. New Directions' victory was based on the promise that they would develop a genuine fighting union sensitive to the needs and feelings of the membership. In reality, in the service of the financial powers that they really represent, they have done everything in their power to keep workers under control.

Tyson employee admits to conspiracy to transport undocumented workers

A former employee of Tyson Foods, the giant poultry processor, admitted to smuggling undocumented immigrants into the company's US plants to be used as low-paid labor. Amador Anchondo-Rason, a native of Mexico, faces a possible five-year prison sentence, a \$250,000 fine and the forfeiture of profits from the illegal venture.

Anchondo-Rascon testified that he transported foreign workers to Tyson plants in Shelbyville, Tennessee and provided them with fraudulent identification, including Social Security cards.

Justice department officials would not say whether Anchondo-Rascon would be used as a witness against six Tyson executives who have also been charged by the federal government with conspiracy to transport undocumented workers. Anchondo-Rascon's lawyer indicated his client would cooperate with US attorneys.

Machinists union sues over presidential emergency board at United Airlines

A US federal judge refused to grant a temporary restraining order barring the decision by George W. Bush to appoint a presidential emergency board to preside over negotiations between United Airlines and its 15,000 mechanics. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) had sued to overturn Bush's action that barred a Christmas holiday strike at United.

Judge James Robertson, however, will allow a hearing on whether the Bush administration should have intervened in the dispute. The IAM's suit named the National Mediation Board and United as defendants and sought to bar Bush's decision that prevents the mechanics from striking for 60 days. The judge will allow the IAM to present its case that the board made its recommendation to the White House to simply avoid a strike, while not meeting the legal requirements governing negotiations in the airline industry.

Mechanics at United have been without a pay raise since 1994 and for the past two years the IAM has negotiated without success to reach a new agreement.

Delta Air Lines to finally grant pay raise to mechanics

Delta Air Lines will allow a 16 percent pay raise for 10,000 mechanics to be implemented in March. The pay hike, originally due to be awarded in October, was withdrawn in the wake of the September 11 disaster.

Pay for Delta mechanics, who are nonunion, had fallen behind pay at other major airlines as of last year when the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) launched a campaign to organize the workforce. AMFA charged that Delta finally conceded the pay raise to its mechanics to head off their unionization. According to Delta, the pay raise makes its mechanics the second highest paid in the industry, behind those at American Airlines.

President overturns unions at Justice Department agencies

President Bush, using the excuse of heightened national security following the September 11 tragedy, overturned union representation at several Justice Department agencies. The decision involves the

department's Criminal Division and 93 US attorney's offices.

The White House argued labor contract work rules could prevent the implementation of new practices aimed at fighting terrorism and therefore threatened national security. Carl Goldman, executive director of Council 26 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, declared, "It's a cynical attempt to use September 11 to weaken unions."

The move is based on a 1978 law governing unionization of federal workers. While allowing workers to join unions, it also permitted the president to ban unions in agencies that focus on "intelligence, counter-intelligence, investigative or national security work." Besides the Criminal Division and US attorney's offices, Bush's ban includes the National Drug Intelligence Center, Office of Intelligence Policy and Review and the US Interpol office.

Law extending workweek cited in Windsor strike

New labor legislation which came into effect last September in Ontario is behind the strike by workers at a food-oil processing plant in Windsor Ontario, according to their union. Changes to the provincial Employment Standards Act now allow for a 60-hour workweek as opposed to the historic standard of 48.

Ninety-two workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), went on strike December 12 in opposition to demands by ADM Agri-Industries for a longer workweek. The changes are supposed to require workers to agree to the extended hours, but that provision is proving to mean little in practice.

The company operates 24 hours a day refining canola and soya oils and prior to the changes required employees to work 48 hours a week. Minister of Labour Chris Stockwell, who drafted the new rules, has denied that the changes affect union contracts, saying that unions have often agreed to longer workweeks than allowed by law.

Labatt workers locked out at Ontario plant

Over 300 workers at Labatt's Horton Street plant in London, Ontario walked off the job last week after they were locked out. The brewing company closed its doors the day after workers voted to reject a final contract offer. According to a union spokesman, the outstanding issue is the hiring of 80 part-time workers at reduced wages and with no benefits.

The workers are represented by the Brewery General and Professional Workers' Union and say they expect this could be a lengthy strike. They voted to reject the company's final offer, which had provisions for an 18 percent wage hike over six years and a \$2,000 signing bonus, but with major concessions on the number and rights of part-time workers. The company has been stockpiling product in anticipation of a job action, but its seven other breweries in Canada have continued operation.

Students walk out in support of B.C. teachers

About 500 students in southern British Columbia walked out of classes to stage a protest in front of Premier Gordon Campbell's office in Vancouver last Friday.

Teachers in the province have been involved in limited job actions against the provincial Liberals, which in recent weeks has meant the elimination of extracurricular activities for students. Most of the students at the demonstration were from one high school in the town of Kitsilano, but there were also walkouts in the nearby Okanagan Valley.

The Campbell government has provoked public opposition with deep cuts to budgets and services and last year outlawed the right to strike by teachers. The British Columbia Teachers Federation is asking for wage increases of 22.5 percent in a new three-year contract, but the province is offering only 8 percent.



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