

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 January 2002

## Construction workers demand better working conditions in Panama

Construction workers, members of the United Union of Construction Workers (SUNTRACS) in the city of Colon, Panama, struck for two days last week, paralyzing construction of a hospital and a shopping center. They are demanding higher wages and improved working conditions.

The workers point out that the construction companies take advantage of the high unemployment in the region to pay starvation wages. During the job action, the union obtained the support of the unemployed movement of Colon.

In the city of Las Tablas, highway construction workers returned to work after a month-long strike over the lack of safety equipment and low wages. The strike began December 20 after the highway contractor, Preconsa S.A., stopped paying into the workers' retirement fund and delayed payment of the contractual year-end bonus known as the "thirteenth month."

According to a SUNTRACS spokesperson, the strike was lifted even though the contractor has yet to fully comply with workers' demands.

## Transit workers strike in Sao Paulo

On January 18, Sao Paulo bus drivers declared a partial strike of indefinite duration to protest "emergency contracts" that will lead to layoffs. Bus operators and fare collectors fear that a new municipal rationalization plan that grants routes to private operators will leave many of them without work.

The city has been divided into eight bundles of lines that have been handed out to a group of 17 companies, excluding 6 companies that currently provide these same services. The object of the plan is to merge nearly bankrupt operators into larger, hopefully more cost-effective, companies.

Bus Drivers Union President Edivaldo Santiago da Silva warned that the plan could result in the layoff of 3,500 workers. Municipal authorities insist that they need more time to come up with an incentive plan to protect workers' jobs. Even so, declared Santiago: "I have colleagues with 20 years of seniority. They could be made to work in distant zones, with no compensation. City Hall forgot about the workers when they made those agreements; now they insist on not delaying the project. That is why we are on strike."

The emergency contracts provide that within the next 90 days 10 percent of the buses will be replaced with newer model busses. Any bus built before 1991 will be retired from service. At that time companies will be free to propose new routes and to cut back service, which will result in further layoffs.

## Brazilian unions in solidarity with South Korean workers

The National Metal Workers Confederation (CNM-CUT) announced January 18 it would convene a protest rally in front of the Sao Paulo Korean consulate on January 22 to demand the release of metalworkers leader Sung Hyum Mun who was arrested last year for organizing a strike. Hyum Mun is the president of the Korean

Metalworkers Federation (KMWF.) The protest is part of an international campaign coordinated by the International Federation of Metal Industry Workers (FITIM).

South Korea is known for its repressive labor practices. Currently, many labor leaders languish in jail for engaging in union activities.

## Cotton workers fight police in Peru

Preliminary reports indicate that at least 50 cotton producers were injured and 10 arrested in clashes with Peruvian security forces on January 17.

Impoverished cotton producers and agricultural workers in the Santiago and Ocucaje regions were blocking a local highway to protest the low prices for cotton, which are forcing them into impoverishment. Peruvian police attacked the demonstration with indiscriminate use of tear gas. At the same time Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi declared that he would propose legislation to punish those erecting highway barricades with prison terms.

## Mobilizations continue in Argentina

On January 19, workers convened in Plaza de Mayo to mark the one-month anniversary of the December 19 mobilization that forced President Fernando de la Rúa to resign. The demonstration demanded the prosecution of the policemen guilty of killing seven demonstrators that day. That level of violence had not been seen in Plaza de Mayo, across from Government House, since the military coup against Peron in 1955.

In the Industrial City of Rio Cuarto, Cordoba province, seven police were injured and 14 protesters arrested. Three banks and the homes of three Justicialista Party (Peronists) legislators were damaged as a result of violent clashes between demonstrators and the police.

In Santiago del Estero, 300 workers and municipal employees were attacked by police forces using tear gas and rubber bullets. The workers had attacked city hall demanding to be paid for the last three months wages.

On January 17, labor lawyers staged their own pot-banging demonstration in Buenos Aires, demanding that the Supreme Court resign. Similar rallies had been taking place for the last four Thursdays. This time, however, they were joined by hundreds of others denouncing the complicity of the courts with corrupt politicians and multinational banks.

In La Quiaca, on the border with Bolivia, 110 unemployed workers staged symbolic "crucifixions" and 300 demonstrators attacked municipal buildings on January 16. The angry protesters, demanding that the municipal authorities cut their own wages, beat two fleeing officials.

Again on January 17, more than 2,000 people marched into Rosario, Argentina's third largest city, from cities comprising the industrial suburbs to the south. They marched to the Monument to the Flag overlooking the Parana River and were joined by another thousand unemployed workers, bank workers, and government workers. They then marched on City Hall.

Another mass march took place in the Neuquen, in the oil producing region. Three thousand marched to demand the release from jail of four union leaders involved in previous protests.

#### **Child workers in Argentina**

An estimated 300,000 children in Argentina, some as young as four years old, are employed as laborers. Child labor is officially prohibited for youth under the age of 14. A report from the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) also says that 5 million Argentine children live in poverty and 1 million endure conditions of hunger.

#### **United CEO demands pay cuts**

United Airlines CEO Jack Creighton demanded pay cuts as the airline continues to pile up debt. Speaking to employees via a taped address, he said, "All employee groups must contribute to labor-cost reductions of several billion dollars over the next few years."

Creighton made it clear that he expects the full cooperation of the labor bureaucracy, saying, "The company cannot recover if the union leaders don't determine among themselves how the employee groups will contribute to the savings."

The company dodged a strike by its 15,000 mechanics when the Bush administration intervened by establishing an emergency board and delaying strike action until February 20. Machinists spokesman Joe Tiberi, whose union is being challenged by the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association to represent United's mechanics, said, "Concessions with our union or any other are not part of the equation."

Jeff Zack, spokesman for the Association of Flight Attendants, also declared opposition to concessions: "We have a contract. We'll be glad to talk to them about how they can fix United's problems, but we're not talking about concessions."

Creighton claimed that United's salaried and management employees have held meetings to discuss pay cuts for its nonunion sector. United lost \$1.8 million during the first nine months of 2001, before the September 11 hijackings.

#### **Steel union agrees to pay cuts at Republic**

Steelmaker Republic Technologies International and the United Steelworkers of America reached an agreement to cut workers' pay by 15 percent through May as a way of improving the company's dismal economic outlook.

Workers had been due pay increases from November 2001. These are to be delayed until January 2003. Pay increases due during 2002 will be held back until July 2004. New hourly wage increases of 50 cents were added for May 2005 and March 2006.

Mail ballots are expected to be returned by January 24 from workers at Republic plants in Canton, Massillon and Lorain, Ohio; Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania; Chicago and Harvey, Illinois; Gary, Indiana; Lackawanna, New York; and Hamilton, Ontario.

According to reports, the tentative agreement was accompanied by a company promise to cut 200 full-time nonunion company workers and outside contractors. Republic filed for bankruptcy in April 2001.

#### **Workers strike Michigan sausage plant**

Workers at a meat processing plant in Dearborn, Michigan walked off the job January 15, upset over a contract proposal. The Dearborn Sausage Company refused to make provisions in their contract for overtime or holiday pay and they charge the company's health insurance premiums are too expensive.

Over a dozen workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 876, took part in the action. The plant is continuing operations despite the walkout.

#### **Air Canada seeks strike ban**

The largest air carrier in the country is seeking to bar many of its workers from striking by having them declared in essential service under the Canada Labour Code.

Air Canada made its proposal known as it entered contract negotiations with its flight attendants, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The Quebec-based airline is demanding that one quarter of its 8,500 flight attendants be declared essential workers. It has indicated it will also seek similar measures from other unions such as the Air Canada Pilots Association (ACPA).

If any of the unions involved do not agree to contract provisions barring strikes, Air Canada will appeal to the Canadian Industrial Relations board. If successful, the measure would effectively ban strikes in the Canadian airline industry.

#### **B.C. Government to end teachers dispute**

Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell has given instructions to his Labour Minister to impose a contract on 46,000 teachers in the province of British Columbia who have been involved in limited job actions for several months.

The two unions representing teachers have been at an impasse in contract negotiations with the province and have reacted with anger to the government's latest move. The announcement by the premier immediately followed overtures by union leaders softening their demands. This latest attack comes in the wake of new laws declaring teaching an essential service in the province, which unions have appealed.

Support for the teachers had been growing in recent weeks, particularly among students. The crackdown on teachers follows the announcement last week of massive cutbacks and layoffs of government workers in the province.

#### **Alberta teachers set to strike**

Teachers in the provincial capital of Edmonton have announced they will go on strike February 4 and it is expected that they will be joined by at least half of the province's 32,000 teachers following that date.

The Alberta Teachers Association is coordinating the strike, but says it is up to each local to decide if and when they will take action. The union is seeking wage increases of 20 percent over two years, but Learning Minister Lyle Oberg has said that the province can only afford 6 percent. Teachers are also seeking reductions in class sizes and improvements in classroom conditions.



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