

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 February 2002

University employees strike in Mexico City

The Independent Union of Workers for the Metropolitan Autonomous University (SITUAM) called on the university management to negotiate a quick end to the strike that began February 1.

SITUAM negotiator David Villarruel indicated that the union will not accept a government offer of 5.2 percent in wages and 4 percent in additional benefits for the 5,200 workers it represents.

Villarruel declared that the union has a substantial strike fund in expectation of a prolonged strike. He pointed out that in his experience, no previous strike at the university has been settled before the fifteenth strike day.

Brazilian unions to strike against anti-labor legislation

Scores of union leaders met on February 1 in the City of Porto Alegre, Brazil to discuss the organization of a national strike on March 21. The strike would coincide with a Senate debate of draft labor legislation that would consolidate labor law and make it easier for employers to sack workers.

Jose Antonio Felicio, president of the United Workers Central (CUT), said that union mobilizations that took place in the last half of 2001 were not able to stop the legislation. The CUT leadership took advantage of the World Social Forum, currently taking place in Porto Alegre, to convene the union delegates.

Dominican teachers fight for wage increases

On February 6, the Dominican Professors Association (ADP) will mobilize teachers across the Dominican Republic to demand a 100 percent wage increase and that the government carry out last year's agreements.

"We don't have plans to paralyze education," declared ADP leader Eduardo Cuello, "but there will be strike action unless our demands are addressed by government officials."

Mass demonstration for jobs in Argentina

On January 29, over 15,000 unemployed rallied at Buenos Aires' May Square, across from the Office of President Duhalde. Thousands had marched all night from the industrial suburb of La Matanza.

The protesters demanded that the Argentine government create one million jobs and a 380 peso monthly subsidy for the unemployed. Along the route of the march, the La Matanza workers received support from surrounding neighbors and storekeepers. Some threw confetti on the marchers.

At the square, columns of workers from other parts of Buenos Aires met the La Matanza protesters.

On January 30, President Duhalde acknowledged the workers demands but declared the 380 peso subsidy "impractical." Instead he proposed a 200 peso subsidy that would apply to 750,000 out of the 4 million unemployed workers.

Tentative agreement averts strike at oil refineries

Shell Oil and its affiliates and union negotiators reached a tentative national agreement February 1 covering 30,000 oil workers. The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) International Union called off a threatened strike against six selected target refineries owned by Exxon Mobil, Chevron Texaco and Phillips Petroleum.

The tentative agreement would last until January 31, 2006. It calls for an initial wage increase of 3.5 percent, or 85 cents an hour, followed by yearly hikes of 3.5 percent, 3.7 percent and 4 percent. PACE had been calling for a first-year wage increase of \$1.40 an hour with subsequent raises of 6 percent per year. Oil workers make an average \$23 an hour. The new agreement would bring this to \$25.79.

Evening shift differential will increase from 50 cents to 75 cents while the overnight differential will rise to \$1.50, up from \$1.00. The contract contains a letter of agreement on job security, including no layoffs. The clause would not be operable if a plant were sold, closed or merged.

Oil workers at Conoco's Commerce City, Colorado oil refinery were sharply opposed to the company's earlier proposal to reduce sick-leave benefits and implement new work rules that would force them to fulfill unfamiliar work assignments, setting up potentially dangerous situations.

A strike is still possible since the contract does not provide bigger pay hikes to workers at the Chevron-Texaco and Equilon Enterprises plants in Northern California, where the high cost of living demands additional compensation. Steve Sullivan, a PACE union representative in Northern California, told Reuters, "The membership here has the right to say that's not enough and we reject it and we authorize a strike, so we could still have a strike action at these refineries."

Flight attendants union drive fails at Delta

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) failed in their bid to unionize 19,000 attendants at Delta Airlines after a four-year campaign. While the vote was 5,520 for unionization and 89 against, a successful campaign requires a majority of all eligible workers. Nonreturned ballots count as "no" votes.

Delta is the nation's third largest airline and, apart from its 10,000 pilots, remains largely nonunion. Last year the AFL-CIO suffered a severe defeat in attempting to organize the company's 11,000 ramp workers.

The AFA has charged that Delta illegally interfered in the election and will challenge the results. According to AFA, supervisors illegally questioned flight attendants about their support for unionization, sent out letters and videos that warned jobs were at stake and held individual meetings with attendants at

which those who evinced support for the union were accused of being “anti-Delta.”

The AFA also charges the company with attempting to link the September 11 disaster with the union drive and implying that a vote for the union would be anti-patriotic. Delta admits that it did combine the two events in letters and a video to flight attendants. The National Mediation Board has said it will look into all the allegations and, if true, order a new election.

Pilot fired after altercation with airport security

US Airways has refused to reinstate a pilot who was fired last October after a conflict with airport security at Philadelphia International Airport. Ed Graf, who is 51 years old and has flown with US Airways since 1987, was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

The altercation began on October 13, when Graf was told to “tip” his hat after he walked through a metal detector. “I knew that was a nonstandard question,” Graf told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The screener should have asked for Graf to remove the hat so it could be properly inspected. When Graf requested that the security check continue in a private screening room, a routine contained in an agreement with US Airways, the screener and Philadelphia police began to give him a hard time.

Roy Freundlich, an official with the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), charges that there was “a tremendous overreaction by the screeners and by the Philadelphia police.” Graf paid \$100 to attend a law enforcement-ordered class and his record was expunged. Then, 13 days after the incident, US Airways fired him. On January 18, US Airways denied a union appeal to have Graf reinstated. ALPA will take his case to arbitration.

ALPA reports having received thousands of complaints from union members who report problems or inconsistencies with airport screening. Many pilots are indignant that the process treats them as security threats. The Association of Flight Attendants has also submitted a complaint to the transportation department charging that many of its members report mistreatment and intimidation by security personal, in some cases of a sexual nature.

Union agrees to job cuts to save New Jersey newspaper

The Newspaper and Mail Deliverers’ Union agreed to the slashing of half of its members’ jobs before the management of the *Jersey Journal* finally called off its threat to shut down the 137-year-old paper. The Newspaper Guild and the Professional Employees International Union had previously agreed to similar cuts.

Management had threatened to shut down the paper by February 1 unless it got the 50 percent job reductions. The paper has been suffering from falling subscription and advertising revenues. The agreement by the drivers followed an intervention by Jersey City’s mayor, Glenn Cunningham, who offered the paper up to \$1 million in financial assistance.

Alberta teachers on strike

Over 14,000 teachers across the province walked off the job on Monday and hundreds more were locked out at Catholic school boards in Calgary. Weekend-long bargaining sessions insisted on by the province failed to produce an agreement.

Each school board in the province negotiates separate agreements with teachers, which has meant a patchwork of strike

actions since some boards have already signed contracts. However, 19 school districts, representing almost half the teachers in the province, are facing job action. School boards are restricted by a provincial funding formula which translates into larger classes and fewer teaching positions. As in other Canadian provinces, the cuts to education in Alberta are being used to fuel the growth of a private school system.

The Catholic School Board in the city of Calgary changed the locks on schools Monday, marking only the second time teachers have been locked out in Alberta history. Teachers are fighting for wage increases of from 17 to 22 percent as well as smaller class sizes and provisions for specialized teaching positions.

Public school teachers in the city will stay on the job at least until they hold a strike vote on February 12. In addition to pay increases, teachers are asking for better classroom conditions, including smaller classes, and added incentives to retain teaching staff.

British Columbia: teachers plan further action

Following the one-day protest on January 28, the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) has said it is planning further action against the attacks of the provincial Liberal government in response to legislation pushed through by Premier Gordon Campbell gutting contracts of teachers and other public sector workers.

Thousands of social service workers staged a one-day walkout on January 29 to protest Bill 29, which tears up contracts for 100,000 public service workers in the province, gutting job security and severance provisions. The government offensive follows the announcement last month of the cutting of up to one third of public sector jobs in the province.

David Chudnovsky, president of BCTF, says future action could include more walkouts and that his union will form a common front with labour in the province. Over 200 representatives of B.C. teachers met over the weekend to discuss the implications of Bills 27 and 28, new laws which impose a contract on teachers and open the door to the privatization of education.



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