

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 February 2002

Protest on anniversary of Mexican student strike

More than 20 members of the General Strike Committee (CGH) blocked the main access to the National Autonomous University (UNAM) for 24 hours on February 7. They are marking the second anniversary of the yearlong student strike in defense of the democratic right to an education, which has faced police repression.

More protests by Argentine unemployed

Unemployed workers, members of the National Picketers Block, took over Buenos Aires' Mayo Square on February 6. They were demanding 100,000 jobs, a more equitable distribution of income, 130 tons of food items and the release of jailed leaders. Columns of protesters had marched early in the morning from industrial neighborhoods in the west and south of the city.

On the way they rallied in front of the Repsol-YPF, the main oil company in Argentina, to demand the creation of 50,000 jobs and the re-nationalization of the company, now owned by Spanish capitalists.

Government officials received the marchers' petition, but refused their demands. The National Picketers Block vowed to continue the struggle with a Picketers' Assembly at Mayo Square on February 16.

More Argentine protests

On February 8, Argentina's 120,000 pharmacies shut their doors for six hours to protest the high cost of medications. The pharmaceutical union and organizations of retired people charge that laboratories are taking advantage of the nation's financial collapse to gouge the public. The cost of medication has increased by more than 30 percent since the peso was devalued this month. Three thousand pharmacy employees rallied at Mayo Square.

Throughout the week pot-banging groups rallied across Argentina to protest against the banks and the government's economic policies. On Friday night, over 7,000 rallied in Mayo Square in a "Carnival of Protest." Unemployed workers shut down various roads into and out of Buenos Aires. In Misiones Province, unemployed workers and producers of mate, a South American tea, blocked highways demanding jobs and agricultural support.

Transit strike in Bolivia

The Cochabamba Federation of Motor Transport carried out a 24-hour strike February 6 in response to social conflicts between the government and coca-leaf growers in this city.

Federation leader Rene Vargas charged the government with irresponsibility for not solving social problems, saying bus drivers are unwitting victims of this atmosphere of insecurity.

Coca-leaf farmers have blockaded Cochabamba's city center for several weeks as part of their protest against government legislation that greatly restricts the coca producing areas. Coca cultivation is legal in Bolivia.

Teachers protests continue in the Dominican Republic

On February 5 the Dominican Professors Association (ADP) warned of President Hipolito Mejia's refusal to raise teachers' salaries by more than 6 percent, in violation of agreements made in July 2001 for

"significant" wage increases that would protect the teachers' buying power.

Mejia has denounced the teachers as a group looking for privileges and vowed to grant no wage increases beyond his current offer. He denied that he ever promised wage increases to cover inflation.

Between February 11 and 18, teachers will be holding rallies in various cities to inform parents of the conditions they face. ADP leaders say that teachers will strike to force Mejia to address their concerns.

Mexican university unions continue protests

Mexican university unions say a government offer that gives National Autonomous University (UNAM) workers a higher wage increase than workers at other universities is unfair. The unions, part of the Broad Front of University and Higher Education Unions (FASUES), are rejecting a government offer of 5.25 percent and are threatening to strike. UNAM workers have been offered 8.76 percent.

Last week strikes at Veracruz University and the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala resulted in agreements of 5.25 percent in raises and 3.35 percent in social benefits, a combined package of more than 8 percent.

In Mexico City's Metropolitan University (UAM), negotiations are at an impasse. Preparations are being made to transfer classes for its 45,000 students to off-campus sites

At the Chapingo Autonomous University west of Mexico City, 2,200 administrative employees struck for 12 hours on February 8, during which time they carried out a silent demonstration in Mexico City demanding a 40 percent wage increase—parity with UAM plus the 8 percent raise. At dawn, 28 buses drove the workers to rallies at the Agriculture, Public Credit and Labor ministries. Clerical workers at Chapingo earn about \$300 a month.

Protests also took place last week at university campuses in Nayarit and Zacatecas.

Guatemala teachers march

Public school teachers marched February 8 through downtown Guatemala City to demand a 100 percent raise and an increase in the budget for education. Education Minister Mario Torres declared that the government would not agree to the teachers' demands. While he left the door open for further negotiations and appeared to recognize the teachers' right to protest, Torres warned that the government would take strong measures against those who struck.

Tentative agreement in Oregon nurses strike

Union and hospital management negotiators at Oregon Health & Science University reached a tentative agreement February 6 that seeks to end a strike by 1,300 nurses that began on December 17.

The proposal calls for 7 percent raises in each of the contract's first two years and a minimum 6.5 percent raise in the third year. The Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) had been seeking 19 percent over the course of the first two years while the hospital insisted it would pay no more than a combined 14 percent during that period. The

contract also includes payments to full-time nurses to help offset insurance costs. The ONA is recommending nurses accept the tentative agreement.

Deadlock in Pittsburgh transit talks

Three deadlines have passed in negotiations between Pittsburgh's Port Authority and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 85 covering 2,800 drivers, mechanics and other transit workers. Neither side is divulging the present state of contract talks, although it is believed that health care, wages, pensions and work rules all remain unresolved.

The union's four-year contract expired November 30, 2001. Pennsylvania's Labor Relations Board may appoint a fact-finder when that agency meets on February 19. The fact-finder would have 45 days to prepare a report. The ATU and the Port Authority would have 15 days to accept or reject the findings.

The last strike by Pittsburgh's transit workers occurred in 1991 when the union struck for 26 days and was ultimately forced back to work by a permanent injunction.

Mediator attempts to conclude New Jersey teachers struggle

The Middletown, New Jersey school board has accepted a mediator's proposal that seeks to end a bitter contract struggle that led to a judge's decision last December to jail 228 teachers for refusing to end their strike.

The union's 1,000 members have not yet ratified the agreement despite an earlier pledge by the union leadership to abide by proposals drawn up by Ronald J. Riccio, a former dean of the law school at Seton Hall University. The proposal calls for a 4 to 4.6 percent pay increase over the course of a four-year agreement. The deal reportedly calls for a "compromise" on health benefits. According to the school board's lawyer, the union must also drop lawsuits that seek to prevent the board from docking teachers' pay for striking.

Riccio's report also contains a criticism of the handling of the strike that resulted in what he termed "confrontational culture" that trickled down and infected both students and parents.

New York Union bureaucrat charged with racketeering

A US attorney in Brooklyn, New York has charged Anthony DeGennaro, an official of the International Union of Elevator Constructors Local 1, and his associates with taking illegal payments, money laundering and tampering with witnesses.

Among the allegations is that DeGennaro put his son, father-in-law and chauffeurs on the union payroll as "no shows" who supposedly worked jobs on construction sites operating temporary elevators for construction workers. The individuals would claim to be working as many as three different jobs on the same day at the same time. One timecard showed 33 hours clocked in the same day. Participants in the fraud could collect as much as \$3,000 a week by holding a regular job as well as one or two other "no show" jobs. DeGennaro laundered the money with the help of his wife, who was also charged in the case.

According to the US attorney the group siphoned off more than \$6 million in five years. "The leaders of this union stole money every which way they could," declared US Attorney Alan Vinegrad. "They used their relatives to steal, they used their drivers to steal, they used their members to steal and they stole money outright in their own names."

Nurses walk out at Montreal hospital

Last Thursday, the nurses at Montreal's Saint-Luc hospital, one of the largest hospitals in the city, staged a wildcat strike to protest understaffing and chronically overcrowded emergency rooms.

Beginning Sunday night nurses refused to work if they considered

the security of patients at risk due to understaffed emergency rooms "We will respect our ethical code: it's our duty as professionals to denounce the actual situation," stated Johanne Morin, head of the nurses union at Saint-Luc hospital. The nurses are calling on their co-workers in other Montreal hospitals, particularly Hotel-Dieu and Notre-Dame hospital, to join their protest movement this week.

A principal grievance for nursing staff is the practice of deliberately allowing staffing shortages. Last Thursday there were supposed to be 17 nurses on staff at Saint-Luc, but when only 12 came on shift, management would not call for replacements. Nurses say that the hospital actually has 130 fewer nurses on staff than what are needed.

In recent years the situation in the Quebec health-care system, as in other provinces, has gone from bad to worse. Fifteen thousand nursing jobs were eliminated and seven hospitals were closed in 1998 by the Parti Québécois government. In 1999, 47,500 nurses went on a three-week illegal strike against worsening conditions in the health-care system, an action that won widespread public support, but which was ultimately betrayed by the union leadership.

Alberta teachers strike enters second week

Nearly half of Alberta's teachers, over 13,000, are continuing a strike which began on February 4 and is not expected to end any time soon. Their action could be joined next week by 6,000 more teachers in Calgary if they pass a strike vote on Tuesday.

Tory Premier Ralph Klein inflamed hostilities between the provincial government and striking teachers last week with comments he made on a trade tour to Japan, in which he unfavorably compared Alberta teachers to their Japanese counterparts. Klein says that his government will not introduce legislation to force teachers back to work, but claims there is no more money available to meet wage demands by teachers of 20 percent over three years.

The Alberta Teachers Association says they may raise union dues by as much as 75 percent if the strike extends into March and continues to grow. If that situation arises the union will call on teachers who are still working, which could be as few as 10,000, to subsidize their striking colleagues.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact