

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 February 2002

## Argentina: refinery under siege by angry workers

Some 1,000 petrochemical workers blocked all accesses to the Polo Petroquimico refinery at Dock Sud in Buenos Aires all last week. The workers are demanding back pay and the creation of 50,000 jobs at 1,000 pesos a month (US\$500). The refinery is owned by Repson, a Spanish oil company.

The protesters belong to the Territorial Movement of Petrochemical Liberation (MTLP). Together with area unemployed workers they are preventing the movement of tanker trucks in and out of the refinery. A shortage of gasoline is being felt in the southern part of the capital city. On February 15, the workers lifted the blockade to avoid a confrontation with government troops.

## Argentine protesters seize food

On February 14, social protest in Argentina escalated with workers demanding unemployment relief, food and an end to the continuing stream of layoffs across the nation. The official unemployment rate now stands at 23 percent. For the first time since the fall of President De la Rúa on December 20, food was seized from supermarkets in the industrial suburbs of Cordoba, Argentina's second largest city and center of the auto industry.

In Villa Dolores, 150 kilometers north of Cordoba, supermarket protesters battled the police. Unemployment in that town is estimated at 50 percent. Mayor Hector Zani admitted that the northern Cordoba province is in the midst of a "food crisis."

Argentine officials do not consider Cordoba a "problem" province, unlike Chaco, Salta, Jujuy and Buenos Aires, where mass protests occurred last week. There were also mobilizations in Catamarca and San Juan, both on the Chilean border.

## Buenos Aires newspaper denounces "soviets"

Last week, Buenos Aires' prestigious daily denounced the neighborhood assemblies that have appeared around the nation as "soviets." The paper called on the government to repress assembly organizers under a provision of the 1853 Constitution that states only elected representatives in Congress may represent citizens. Neighborhood assemblies have sprung up across the nation as a means to fight unemployment.

## Venezuelan health professionals demand clinics be opened

Members of the Venezuelan Medical Federation in Caracas blocked freeways three times last week to demand the opening of health centers, that the government carry out its contractual obligations with health workers and pay wage increases due January 1.

During the protests, doctors allowed one freeway lane to remain open, asking motorists to honk in support. Douglas Leon Natera, president of the health workers union, denounced critical shortages the clinics are facing: "It is unheard of that these needed supplies are kept from these clinics, preventing us from giving patients the care they deserve."

The Chavez government has all but abandoned its populist pretense of promoting economic equality. Last week it acceded to demands

from the International Monetary Fund to devalue the Venezuelan peso, an action that is rapidly worsening the conditions of misery that afflict 80 percent of the population.

## Mexican university workers strike

The union of Academic Personnel of the Autonomous University of Zacatecas (SPAUAZ) began a strike February 15 for higher wages. SPAUAZ represents the 1,540 university professors, who rejected a 5.25 percent raise in wages and a 3.2 percent raise in benefits. At noon, union pickets hoisted the red and black flags that are traditional in Mexico's strikes.

## Abuse of Guatemalan women workers exposed

Women workers in the domestic service and sweatshop industries are afforded no legal protections from the Guatemalan state, according to a Human Rights Watch report published last week.

The report said poor women are denied access to health services and are subject to racial and gender discrimination. Most domestic servants are Native Americans. Domestic service workers are denied social security benefits and are forced to work as much as 14 hours a day. The managers of maquiladoras (clothing sweatshops that subcontract for US firms) routinely deny health benefits to women who may be pregnant.

## Union protests the layoff of 2,000 Bolivian teachers

The Confederation of Urban Teachers (CMU) denounced the Bolivian Education Ministry's elimination of 2,000 teachers' jobs. The CMU is threatening to organize hunger strikes against the layoffs. According to the union, technical teachers have already been laid off. Next will be classroom teachers and administrative personnel.

## Air traffic controllers strike in Guatemala

Guatemala's La Aurora International Airport reopened on February 14, following a strike by air traffic controllers. They began their action on February 12, paralyzing virtually all flights. The 82 air traffic controllers are demanding raises of 5,000 quetzal monthly, or about US\$630. They agreed to return to work while negotiations take place.

## Tentative deal announced in United mechanics contract struggle

United Airlines reported a last-minute deal Monday with the union representing the carrier's mechanics. The 12,800 mechanics and aircraft cleaners, represented by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), faced a midnight Tuesday strike deadline. The IAM has scheduled a March 5 ratification vote on the contract, which the union says includes improvements on retroactive and pay and retirement benefits. Workers have gone without a raise for eight years.

The Bush administration had already delayed a potential strike by 60 days. Barring an agreement, only Congress could intervene to extend the cooling-off period, order arbitration or impose a recommendation by Bush's emergency pardon board.

On February 12 union members voted by a 68 percent margin to reject a so-called 37 percent pay increase offered by the airlines. Following the contract rejection, mechanics then voted by an 86 percent margin to strike the airlines.

In reality, the agreement contained clauses that would allow the airline to take back the increase, and possibly more, in six months time. Workers objected to the long delay in retroactive pay provided in the agreement. Besides the loss in economic terms, mechanics also opposed the agreement because they would be giving away the right to vote on concessions. United is losing \$10 million a day with no quick solution to its crisis except to slash the jobs, pay and benefits of its workers.

#### **California oil refinery workers reject contract proposal**

Oil refinery workers at ChevronTexaco's Richmond, California operations rejected a local offer by a 2-1 margin bringing the 700-member workforce a step closer to a strike. Officials of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (PACE) Local 8-5, however, are appealing to executives higher up the ladder for new talks.

ChevronTexaco made a proposal similar to the pattern agreement negotiated the previous week with oil workers in other parts of the United States. The proposal contained an immediate 85-cent hourly wage hike followed by yearly increases of 3.5, 3.7 and 4 percent. But workers at the Richmond plant are insisting on a wage premium that would offset the San Francisco Bay Area's high cost of living.

Refinery workers at Phillips Petroleum plants in Rodeo and Los Angeles are presently voting on contracts, while 400 workers at Royal Dutch/Shell's Equilon operations ratified their pact.

#### **Four-day walkout at Wisconsin shipbuilder**

Workers at the Bay Shipbuilding Company in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin ended a four-day walkout over company abuses February 12. Some 300 workers from electrical, carpenter, boilermakers and pipefitter unions walked off the job to protest arbitrary changes that the company made to grievance and vacation policies. They also contend the shipbuilder has discriminated against workers for union activities. The National Labor Relations Board said it would investigate the workers' claim.

A spokesman for Bay Shipbuilding complained that workers have refused to work overtime and engaged in slowdowns. Negotiations between the unions and the company have been ongoing for several months. Last month the unions refused to submit a contract proposal to their memberships. In October 2001, workers from four unions rejected a proposal due to substandard pay rates and health insurance provisions.

#### **Contract talks resume for New York City's teachers**

New contract talks got under way February 12 between the City of New York and the union representing its 80,000 public school teachers. The contract for the United Federation of Teachers expired in November 2000 and their last raise dates back to December 1999.

The union has asked for a 22.7 percent raise in order to try to bring the city's teachers on par with their counterparts in outlying suburbs. The administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg claims it can only finance a 9 percent raise extending over a 27-month period.

Governor George Pataki has offered a \$204 million package to the city to add an additional 4 percent to the offer. Bloomberg has rejected the plan because it would only finance a single year of the contract, setting up a confrontation in subsequent years. The administration is also seeking to extend teachers' hours through the present contract.

When talks between the two sides bogged down last year, the state named a fact-finding panel, which is expected to issue a non-binding recommendation during the current talks.

#### **New talks at AT&T after contract extension rejected**

AT&T announced it would begin new negotiations for long-term

agreements with its two principal unions starting March 11. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, representing 27,900 workers, rejected AT&T's demand to extend their present contracts by 18 months. The company claimed the economic slowdown and telephone industry slump made a long-term contract impossible.

The CWA responded with a counterproposal, saying it had concerns about job security and job transfers. AT&T has cut 17,000 jobs from the rolls of both unions since 1998 through layoffs, outsourcing and work transfers.

#### **Alberta teachers strike widens**

The largest group of teachers in Alberta voted last week to join the two-week-old province-wide strike. Six thousand teachers in Calgary gave their union an overwhelming mandate for strike action, bringing to 20,000 the total number now off the job. At the same time, reports have emerged that the provincial government is making preparations to have the strike declared illegal by deeming it a public emergency.

The majority of public school teachers across Alberta have been on strike since February 4 in a patchwork of contract disputes between teachers and local school boards. The teachers are fighting for improvements in working conditions, reductions in class sizes and wage increases of 20 percent over two years.

If the teachers are ordered back to work the government would then impose a contract through binding arbitration. However, it is unclear whether these measures would affect all striking teachers. The union has indicated that if it does go back to work it will be under protest.

#### **Edmonton Orchestra on strike**

Musicians of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra (ESO) went on strike February 15 in the first walkout in the symphony's 50-year history. This is the latest in a series of strikes by Canadian orchestras, which have suffered crippling funding losses across the country.

The 56 strikers are members of the Edmonton Musicians' Association and have been without a contract since last September. The strike will only affect performances at the Winspear Centre, the home of the ESO. A free concert at a downtown church went ahead as planned. One of the key issues in the dispute is what musicians are calling a lack of consultation on decisions by the governing symphony society in which they hold a minority vote.



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