

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 February 2002

Jobless workers threaten to blockade Argentine oil refineries

Unemployed workers organizations and neighborhood committees are organizing protests at Argentina's oil refineries to demand 50,000 jobs in the oil industry. The jobless workers have threatened to set up barricades to prevent movement in and out of the refineries. The unemployed are demanding the creation of new work shifts, the spread of available work, an end to fuel price hikes and the nationalization of the oil industry.

The pickets will begin the job action with a massive rally at the Dock Sud refinery in Buenos Aires. Other rallies will set up barricades at refineries in Buenos Aires Province, as well as in the provinces of Salta, Chaco, Chubut, and Santa Fe.

Tensions increase in Argentina

On February 20, two months after the beginning of the protests that toppled President De la Rúa, thousands of unemployed Argentines barricaded highways and hundreds marched on the government house demanding jobs.

The bulk of the protests took place in the Province of Buenos Aires. Significant protests also took place in the northern provinces of Jujuy, Salta Tucuman and Chaco. In Buenos Aires, thousands rallied in front of Congress, demanding legislators reject a draft budget that includes cuts in social services.

While President Duhalde has not used police repression against the demonstrators thus far, he has insisted "the country cannot exist without a minimum of order." Duhalde also raised the possibility that government workers may not be fully paid this month.

Teacher's strike in Pernambuco, Brazil

On February 21, one week after the start of classes, public school teachers declared a strike of indefinite duration in pursuit of a 48.22 percent wage increase. Teresa Leitao, president of the Unions of Education Workers of Pernambuco (SINTEPE), said the union offered a contract proposal to the government last August but did not receive a response until two weeks ago.

The government asked for more time but the union decided not to wait. "We have not had a raise in seven years," said Laitao. In addition to a pay increase the teachers also want the creation of another 10,000 teaching positions. The union currently represents 58,000 teachers and administrators.

Pernambuco is a poor agricultural state in Brazil's northeast. The last teachers strike there took place in March 2001 and lasted 14 days.

Union offensive against Chavez

Venezuela's main workers federation—the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV)—announced February 20 it would launch a series of protests against the government of Hugo Chavez. CTV President Carlos Ortega warned that the nation is

going through an "explosive situation" and an impending national conflict. He denounced the government's decision to float Venezuela's currency, the bolivar, and to cut next year's budget. The CTV includes more than a million workers, including the powerful oil workers union.

Last December the CTV allied itself with business and other reactionary interests in a 12-hour civic strike against Chavez. It is not clear how the new protests, which include a march in Caracas on February 27 and a one- or two-day national strike in March—are related to the attempt by reactionary social layers, in alliance with sections of the military and the US government, to force Chavez to resign. Ortega and the CTV are proposing no alternatives to the pro-business program of Chavez' right-wing opponents, and so far have limited the activity of the unions to toothless protests actions.

Philadelphia mint cited for dangerous work environment

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) discovered 47 "serious" health and safety violations at the United States mint in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania last year. The tally is considered extremely high and the Philadelphia mint, along with the nation's other mint in Denver, Colorado, are considered the two most dangerous federal work sites.

OSHA's report on the Philadelphia mint, which stamps out US coins, cataloged issues such as the precarious stacking of 4,000-lb. coin tanks. A supervisor told inspectors he feared at some point the tanks would topple over and crush him. One department was cited for having only one fire escape that led into an area loaded with compressed-gas cylinders that could potentially explode.

William Beckham of the American Federation of Government Employees told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "The mint knows about the violations, and has failed to correct them. It goes back to their main drive, which is to increase production at the expense of safety." Beckham described an environment where workers are plagued with back problems and injuries resulting from falls; workers hit by forklifts and welders starting fires. In January, a worker had two fingers crushed in a machine.

OSHA lacks the authority to fine another federal agency. Were violations similar to those found at the US to occur in private industry, they would bring a \$250,000 fine. The agency considers a fine over \$100,000 "significant."

Supreme Court releases coal companies from benefit responsibilities

In a 6-3 decision, the US Supreme Court ruled coal companies are exempt from directly paying lifetime health benefits for miners who retired from coal operators that went out of business and were later absorbed by another company. The decision will immediately impact the financial arrangements that pay benefits to retirees or their widows.

The contract ratified by coal operators and the United Mine Workers in 1974

andated lifetime health benefits for all retired miners, even those who worked for companies that went out of business. In 1992, after the plan began to show financial strains, Congress passed legislation to ensure that the fund was maintained by companies that signed the 1974 agreement or “related” companies that later bought them out.

In the case under review, Jerico 1 Mining Company bought Shackleford Coal Company in 1973. Jerico’s retired miners were paid out of a fund called the UMWA Combined Benefit Fund set up by Congress in 1992 to pay benefits to retirees such as those at Shackleford. However, Jerico was subsequently purchased by Sigmon Coal, which is claiming it is not responsible for paying benefits for Shackleford’s retirees. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, along with Justices Clarence Thomas, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, David Souter and Ruth Bader Ginsburg created a loophole by ruling that Sigmon does not fall under the “related” category.

In opposition, Justice John Paul Stevens declared the majority view “produced absurd results.” UMWA President Cecil Roberts revealed that his office has been swamped by phone calls from retirees fearing the loss of health benefits. Roberts declared that no recipients would lose benefits, but warned “the overall financing of the UMWA’s Combined Benefit Fund will be further strained by this decision.”

Recreational vehicle manufacturer settles with workers in pay-denial scheme

Fleetwood Enterprises, a California-based manufacturer of recreational vehicles, agreed to pay \$7.35 million to settle a class-action lawsuit filed by its employees that charged the company with cheating them out of pay.

Workers at the company’s many operations across the nation claimed they were pressured to work early in the morning, through breaks and after their shifts in order to meet quotas. The settlement was paid out to 3,000 current and former employees. However, many of the company’s present 15,000 workers along with former workers are still eligible to join the suit.

Under the settlement, Fleetwood admitted no wrongdoing. Management, however, has made the statement it would end off-the-clock work and modify the manner in which it rounds off hours. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits off-the-clock work.

State fund for injured Florida workers runs dry

A state trust fund administered by Florida’s Department of Labor and Employment Security is running out of money. The fund was established to rehabilitate injured workers and help find new careers for workers no longer able to perform their former trades.

The state was hit by a 13 percent increase in the number of injured workers seeking a new job and a 20 percent leap in the costs of rehabilitation and training. Now workers must wait six months or more until the legislature can deal with the issue of funding the trust. The problem is complicated by the fact these workers are ineligible for other forms of disability benefits unless they are enrolled in a program.

Government bureaucrats looked into directing the disabled workers to the Education Department’s vocational rehabilitation program. However that agency, according to legislative auditors, has been undermined by a panel that sought to move the department toward private management. The result was reduced services and higher costs and the ensuing chaos has placed the department in the position of possibly losing its \$100 million federal grant.

Alberta Tories force end to teachers strike

Alberta’s Conservative government declared a “public emergency” last Thursday to force an end to the largest teachers strike in the province’s history. Learning Minister Lyle Oberg said the strike met the criteria of a public emergency—a situation in which “unreasonable hardship is being caused or is likely to be caused”—because the strike threatened to deprive students of their school year.

The Alberta Teachers’ Association’s initial reaction to the back-to-work order was muted. But after teachers learned that the government has instructed an arbitrator to impose contracts on teachers within existing budgetary parameters, the ATA protested noisily. “We will not lightly surrender our right to strike,” vowed ATA President Larry Booi, in announcing the union’s decision to challenge the legality of the back-to-work order in the courts.

To the Tories’ consternation, many students and parents joined teachers’ picket lines and demonstrations. Several Alberta school boards have urged the government to increase education funding. The Tories, however, insist no more money is available. Clearly, the government moved to break the strike so as to short-circuit the public questioning of its budgetary priorities. Even sections of the parliamentary opposition and press have questioned the Tories’ claim the strike constituted a “public emergency.”

At its height last week, 21,000 of the province’s 32,000 school teachers were on strike.



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