

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 March 2002

## Brazilian transit workers strike

Transit workers in Campinas, one of Sao Paulo Province's largest cities were set to strike March 4. Last Friday, an assembly of about 500 of the 2,400 drivers and ticket sellers who form the union decided on the work stoppage. The workers are demanding a wage increase of 64 percent, retroactive to February, with no increase in fares. Transit bosses were demanding a 50 percent increase in fares for March.

## Hunger in Buenos Aires

On February 27, a group of hungry men and women in Campana, Buenos Aires province, attempted to commandeer a food truck, while not far away hundreds were petitioning a supermarket for food for their families. Campana is an industrial city and railroad hub, 100 kilometers north of the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, which is dominated by a giant oil refinery.

South of the capital, unemployed marched demanding food and jobs. Two months ago a wave of supermarket looting left 30 dead and resulted in the resignation of two presidents. Scenes like these are now commonplace in Argentina, where so far this year more than 800,000 families, formerly earning middle class incomes, have fallen into poverty.

## Argentine teachers attacked by police, sixteen wounded

Sixteen teachers and reporters were wounded on February 28 when police attacked their demonstration in front of Buenos Aires' Provincial Legislature in the city of La Plata. The teachers were protesting the decision by the Provincial Parliament to cut 600 million pesos from the education budget. Peronist Party goons bullied teachers who attempted to lobby inside the building.

Among the budget cuts approved is a reduction in maternity leave (from 135 days to a 90-day maximum) and reduced funding for training teachers. Payment for administrative duties carried out by teachers and subsidies for those who teach in private schools or in rural or harsh conditions were also cut.

As a continuation of the protest teachers plan not to teach on March 4, the official first day of school. Instead they will organize teach-ins with parents and students to denounce the attacks on education. "Poverty is making us all equal. In some provinces teachers have not been paid in three months, scholarships for poor students have been slashed and child breakfast programs have been cut in half," said Clelia Lavini, leader of Argentina's largest teachers union.

Under present economic conditions, attending school has become a luxury for many students in Argentina, where education is free and compulsory but students must buy their own books and supplies. Last week two young students, ages 9 and 10, were caught trying to steal pencils and books so that they could begin attending school. The incident was reported on the television news and aroused widespread sympathy. A nation that at one time had among the highest educational levels in Latin America, now cannot even afford to buy schoolbooks. Last year alone, book sales dropped 40 percent and 250 bookstores closed, leaving only 700 in the entire nation.

## Brazilian state government refuses to pay striking professors' salaries

Jaime Lerner, governor of Brazil's southern state of Parana, will not provide the resources needed to pay striking professors' and school

officials' salaries. In protest, workers at the University Hospital struck for an hour last Friday.

## Venezuelan teachers set to strike

Venezuelan teachers are set to strike for 48 hours on March 5 and 6. They are demanding the Chavez government equalize salaries across the nation, expedite the promotion of teachers to higher pay grades and accelerate the retirement process. Union President Carmen Aguirrechi said the strike had been called because the government refused to negotiate with teachers.

## Rural doctors strike in Peru

Rural doctors in Peru carried out a three-day strike last week to protest their poor pay. The doctors, dentists and nurses, some of whom earn US\$40-42 US dollars a month, are demanding a 100 percent wage increase.

## Education workers strike in Ecuador

Ecuador's education workers have been on strike for two weeks in a dispute over wages. The strike has shut down most provincial schools and many national schools. At the education ministry, a slowdown is ongoing in support of the education workers' demands. Education workers rejected a 33 percent pay raise offer and are demanding a 100 percent increase in their basic wages.

## Chilean postal workers denounce executive pay

Postal workers sued in court against the decision to reward 11 executive directors with performance bonuses at the same time the government claims there is no money to improve workers' wages. Postal leader Hernan Martinez Gomez announced that if the court action fails there will be a mobilization of postal workers on March 14 and a one-day strike on March 27, the day that the bonuses are to be paid.

Postal officials announced that they would issue checks for 75 million pesos (US\$112,000) to the executives, roughly equivalent to three years pay, for improving productivity and cutting costs. Postal workers say the cost savings were achieved through speed-up and mass layoffs.

## Tentative agreement in strike against baseball cap manufacturer

The New Era Cap Company, holder of the exclusive rights to produce caps for Major League Baseball, offered a new tentative agreement to striking workers at its Derby, New York plant. About 215 members of the Communications Workers of America have been on strike against New Era for eight months over new work rules that would increase repetitive stress injuries.

The company is operating the plant with replacement workers and claims that it has increased production while lost-time injuries are down. With the latest offer the company hopes to settle the strike on its terms and boost production by 25 percent to 60,000 caps per week.

The AFL-CIO has merely urged a consumer boycott of New Era products. The company has used an additional plant in Buffalo, New York, and two in Alabama to endure the strike. New Era also produces caps for the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League and many colleges and universities.

## Machinists union calls for rejection of contract at Lockheed

Workers at Lockheed Martin's plant in Marietta, Georgia cast ballots March 3 over a tentative agreement that the International Association of Machinists (IAM) leadership said should be rejected. The offer calls for

annual 3 percent wage increases and a \$500 signing bonus.

The IAM represents 2,700 workers at the Marietta facility where Lockheed, the nation's largest defense contractor, manufactures the C-130J Hercules transports and the F-22 Raptor fighters. If the contract is rejected, workers could strike as early as March 10. The last strike at the Marietta plant was in 1977. Lockheed is also negotiating separately with workers at its other plants in Georgia, Texas and California.

#### **New York transit union calls two-day bus strike**

About 1,500 transit workers went on strike for two days last week against three private bus companies in Queens—Queens Surface Corporation, Jamaica Buses Inc. and Triboro Coach Corporation—that service about 115,000 riders. The strikers also picketed a fourth private bus company, Green Bus Lines, which services more than 60,000 passengers. In sympathy with the strike, the employees of Green Bus, who belong to a different union, refused to cross the picket lines, effectively shutting down the company's operations. This job action was called off after a half day, following a court order banning picketing in front Green Bus Lines.

The strikers were protesting the fact that they have been working 14 months without a new contract. Although the workers are fighting for improved wages and pensions, their major demand is for job security. The three private bus lines are subsidized by the city government, which might contract their routes out to different companies. The workers are demanding the city acknowledge they have the contractual right to keep their jobs irrespective of whatever company operates the routes. There are currently seven companies in Queens servicing about 300,000 passengers, which are engaged in this public-private relationship.

Many workers did not want to return to work after two days on strike with no settlement in sight. At a union meeting, one worker screamed at the union president, Roger Toussaint, asserting they should stay out until their demands were met. The scene was reminiscent of the one-day strike that took place in early January.

At that time, workers called a walkout without the union's knowledge. Caught off guard, the leadership of Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents 36,000 transit workers citywide, did everything in its power to get the strikers back on the job. Toussaint, who as head of a self-acclaimed militant faction that has been in office for a little more than a year, boasted at the time of his ability to end the strike.

#### **United resumes negotiations with other workers while mechanics vote**

United Air Lines has resumed negotiations with its other unions in the wake of the tentative agreement with its mechanics. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) represents some 24,000 ramp workers, customer service agents and food service workers who, like the mechanics, have gone without a raise since 1994. United's 12,000 mechanics are scheduled to begin voting on the deal the company and IAM reached to avoid a strike two weeks ago.

United, in collaboration with the IAM bureaucracy, plans on carrying through the same sham it is attempting to foist on the mechanics—offer a contract with increases only to turn around and institute companywide negotiations with all its employees for several billion dollars in concessions. United reported a record \$2.1 billion net loss for 2001 and insists workers must sacrifice to restore the airline to profitability.

#### **Meat cutters strike enters eighth week**

Meat cutters in the Detroit area are continuing their strike against the Dearborn Sausage plant. The 57 members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 876 struck the plant on January 14. The company has since then announced the permanent replacement of the workers.

Most recently, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that Local 876 illegally threatened to picket stores that carry Dearborn Sausage's various products, which include hot dogs, sausages and hams. Dearborn Sausage

has filed six separate charges against the union alleging unfair labor practices.

#### **Benefit concerts to organize recording artists**

Major recording artists donated their time February 28 to set up concerts in Los Angeles that aim to promote their interests in opposition to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). A newly formed organization, the Recording Artists Coalition, seeks to provide artists with support against the RIAA, which is notorious for raking in the lion's share of proceeds on products such as compact discs.

Among the performers were Sheryl Crowe, the Eagles, Stevie Nicks, No Doubt, the Offspring, Dixie Chicks, Trisha Yearwood, Dwight Yoakam, Emmylou Harris, Billie Joel and John Fogerty. Fogerty, who performed with Creedence Clearwater Revival, is known for having composed the song "Mr. Greed," a reference to Saul Zaentz, the owner of Fantasy Records for whom Creedence recorded. Zaentz retaliated against Fogerty with a lawsuit for defamation of character.

Billy Joel told the Associated Press, "I've found myself in the position where I've had some major questions about the publishing administration also. I have to go in there and audit all the time. I've had managers who've taken me to the cleaners. I've been fleeced numerous times. There are certain promoters who were less than aboveboard. It's not the Boy Scouts. So I perceive the concerts as about artist empowerment. I think it's time for artists to climb out of the ivory tower, to stop living in a dream world and come down and buy groceries with everybody else and find out how the rest of the world lives."

#### **Union and grocery chain dispute workers decertification petition**

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has charged that Shaw's Supermarkets, which operates a grocery chain of some 185 stores, is threatening its workers with higher health-care costs unless they quit the union. A petition for a union decertification election was submitted by a majority of the 1,600 workers employed at Shaw's stores in the Worcester, Massachusetts area.

Basing itself on the petition, Shaw's refuses to recognize the union, even though they are in the middle of a multiyear contract. Shaw's executive vice president told the media, "We're doing what our associates want. For some reason, they are unhappy with the union."

The UFCW claims that Shaw's has manipulated data for health-care costs to encourage the petition. According to the federal government, US health-care costs rose 7 percent in 2000, the fastest increase in more than a decade. In the Massachusetts area workers are facing the fourth consecutive year of double-digit increases in health-insurance premiums.

#### **Alberta teachers strike called off**

Teachers in the province have been told by their union leadership not to resume strike action despite a court ruling last week which overturned the government's bid to force an end to the three-week-old strike by declaring a public emergency.

The Tory government of Ralph Klein took the extraordinary measure last week to bring an end to a strike by 21,000 of the province's 32,000 teachers. The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) successfully challenged the government in court, with the judge ruling there were no grounds for ordering teachers back to work. The ruling gave the teachers the right to resume their strike as of Monday.

Larry Booi, president of the ATA, nevertheless called on teachers to stay on the job saying, "It's never been our goal to have a strike". Booi sought to disguise this naked capitulation as a union victory, declaring what was really at stake was simply the right to strike. He added any new action would be limited to curtailing extracurricular services and the resumption of a full strike would only be considered as a last resort.

The union position is at the same time aimed at demoralizing teachers in other bargaining units who are poised to begin separate strike action in the coming days due to the patchwork of contract negotiations carried out by individual school boards. Along with wages and benefits, the issues of

classroom conditions and understaffing have been central in the protracted battles of teachers with the provincial government. By sharply restricting funding to public school boards, the Alberta government has been in the vanguard of the drive towards privatization of education.

**Halifax, Nova Scotia: professors on strike at Dalhousie University**

Professors at a maritime university in Halifax went on strike Monday in a contract fight for salary improvements and job security. Seventy-five percent of teaching staff voted to begin what will be the fourth strike of its kind at the school in since 1988.

A spokesman for the Dalhousie Faculty Association (DFA) defended the action, saying they are paid well below their counterparts at Canadian schools of comparable size. Professors are seeking increases of 10.8 percent in a three-year contract. Dalhousie claims meeting those demands will require significant hikes in tuition. The DFA says that increased enrollment at the school will more than cover the increases.

The Nova Scotia Tory government of John Hamm has refused demands for further funding to Dalhousie and has said it will not legislate an end to the strike. All classes at the school have been cancelled with the exception of the medicine and dentistry departments.



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