Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 March 2002

Savage police attack on Argentine workers

Provincial police in Salta province savagely attacked pickets blocking a highway on March 9. The police launched a wide dragnet against the population of the city of Embarcacion, entering neighborhoods and invading homes. There are reports that the police used soft lead bullets, designed to be extra lethal, during the attack. The offices of organizations of the unemployed were sacked. Thirty-one workers were arrested. The picketers had been protesting for more than a month, demanding jobs, with no response from government authorities.

Five-day march against unemployment launched in Argentina

Three columns of unemployed "piqueteros" began a protest march on March 11 from different parts of Argentina to demand jobs. The protest is to end this Friday in what is expected to be a massive rally in Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital city. The marchers are demanding work and bread.

Throughout the day protesters coming from the north will assemble in Rosario. Those coming from the south will assemble in Mar del Plata and those from the west will assemble in Mercedes. During the march the three columns will rally in industrial centers, demanding that factories be reopened and that the right to a genuine job be guaranteed to all. A recent study indicates that joblessness will increase by 2 percentage points this year to 22 percent.

Chilean health workers strike

Twenty-four thousand members of the Confederation of Municipal Health Workers (CONFUSAM) went on strike March 11 in Chile, demanding that the Lagos government carry out its promises of salary increases. The workers insist that they are entitled to a 12 percent raise; the government has only offered 9 percent. Chile's United Workers Central (CUT) declared support for the strike and threatened to call other workers out on strike if the government carries out a threat of discounting workers wages for days they do not work.

Mexican copper workers strike

A strike of Mexican workers began on March 5 at the La Caridad mine in Nacozari de Garcia, in Sonora state, about 100 miles south of the Arizona border. The workers rejected a 5 percent wage offer and instead are demanding a 30 percent increase.

Nearly 600 copper workers also struck the San Martin mine in Sombrete, in the central state of Zapatecas, against the company's wage offer of 5 percent. Both mines are owned by *Grupo Mexico*.

Negotiations are stalled with Grupo Mexico representatives. Strikes also broke out at the mine in Nueva Rosita, Coahuila. The rest of Grupo Mexico's mines in Sonora, Coahuilia and San Luis Potosi have also joined the strike.

Striking construction workers mobilize in Peru

More than 5,000 striking construction workers blocked the streets of Lima on March 7 to mark the beginning of an indefinite national strike by 100,000 bricklayers demanding that the Peruvian Construction Chamber (CAPECO) agree to negotiate a collective bargaining contract.

The rally took place in downtown Lima's Plaza Mayor Square. Initially the protesters marched from different parts of the city toward the National Legislature and to the Presidential Palace. The strike has paralyzed more than 90 percent of Peru's construction projects.

Defense workers strike Lockheed Martin plant in Georgia

Workers at Lockheed Martin rejected an eleventh-hour contract proposal Sunday and went on strike at 12:01 Monday morning at an aircraft manufacturing plant in Marietta, Georgia owned by the world's largest defense contractor. In a secret ballot vote, 82 percent of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 709 voted to strike, and 78 percent turned down a three-year proposal that would have raised wages 10 percent over the life of the contract and given each member a $1,000 signing bonus.

The IAM represents 2,700 of the 7,000 workers at the plant, where the company builds F-22 Raptor fighters and C-130J Hercules transports. IAM members in Georgia broke with smaller locals in Palmdale and Sunnyvale, California, where leaders endorsed the proposed contract and members voted to ratify it Sunday. Although they were offered similar terms, IAM Local 709 leaders urged members to reject the company's offer.

Lockheed, which had sales of $24 billion in 2001, won the largest defense aerospace prize in history last year with a $200 billion contract to build the F-35, or Joint Strike Fighter, for the Air Force, Navy and Marines. The Air Force also placed long-term orders for F-22s and C-130Js manufactured in Marietta.

The contracts created new expectations for major wage and benefit improvements. IAM members overwhelmingly rejected 3 percent wage increases and $500 signing bonuses a week ago when 94 percent cast strike ballots. Last-minute concessions by Lockheed would have raised wages 4 percent this year and 3 percent the next two years and doubled the signing bonus. Nevertheless, the offer failed to sway workers, who say job protection and health-care benefits are their main concerns. Employment at the Lockheed plant has declined from a Cold War high of 20,000 in the 1980s, and IAM membership has dwindled from 7,000 in 1990 to 2,700 today.

Mechanics ratify United contract

Mechanics at United Airlines voted by a 59 percent margin March 5 to accept the company's most recent contract offer that, for the moment, gives workers their first raise since 1994. The balloting by the 12,000 members came one day before a scheduled walkout that could have crippled the indebted airline.

Top-paid mechanics got a pay increase of 37 percent that will raise wages from $25.60 to $35.14. Over the next two years union members are to receive retroactive pay of $16,500 that will cover the period from July 12, 2000 to the day the contract is officially signed. The payments will be made quarterly.

The deal signed between United management and the IAM bureaucracy, however, is fraudulent. Everyone knows that the company, which reported a $2.1 billion net loss for 2001, is expected to turn around and ask for concessions sometime after it completes negotiations with 24,000 ramp workers, customer service and reservation employees, also represented by the IAM. The union bureaucracy has already indicated its willingness to push for these concession demands.

Some critics of the latest contract offer claim that in financial terms it is not very different from previous offers. But among the issues that apparently caused a section of workers to finally vote in favor of the new

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agreement was the inclusion of language that stipulates workers must have the right to vote on any future concessionary agreements aimed at bailing out United. The issue reflects deep distrust of the IAM bureaucracy by rank-and-file workers.

Negotiations open between Teamsters and UPS

Negotiators for the Teamsters and UPS (United Parcel Service) management have gotten under way with a July 31 contract termination date drawing into sight. The negotiations take place under the cloud of a growing recession and the fact that the 230,000-member UPS unit of the 1.4 million Teamsters union is the only component that is growing. The UPS contract is understood to be the lifeblood of the Teamsters bureaucracy's treasury.

When the Teamsters struck UPS in 1997 the issue of the company's abuse of part-time labor reverberated across the nation. Despite the rhetoric from then-Teamsters head Ron Carey, the part-time issue was sold out. Today, 58 percent of UPS-Teamsters members are part-timers who start at an abysmal $8.50 an hour and whose average pay is only $10.72 an hour. Full-time drivers make a high of $23.11 an hour.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Teamsters President James Hoffa saying, "We're going to be asking for a lot of money." Management, however, is well aware that Hoffa is committed to defending the profits of the corporation and signing a contract that meets its business aims. UPS company spokesman Norman Black commented, "Both sides have a new appreciation for how our futures are inextricably linked." Hoffa is being praised for helping in the lobbying effort required to open China to UPS penetration.

Immigrant workers demonstrate against evictions in New York City

About 200 immigrant workers and their supporters demonstrated March 5 in New York City against their landlords' attempts to evict them from their apartments. The protest focused on a 22-unit building in New York's Chinatown where low-income tenants have faced harassment and legal action ever since Elizabeth Realty purchased the building in May of 2000.

Long-time tenants described the abusive tactics used by the new owner to try to force them out. The owner is seeking to refurbish the apartments in order to triple the rent for well-heeled professionals willing to pay top dollar to live between the fashionable SoHo district and Wall Street.

Taking advantage of the mostly Chinese and Latino immigrants' lack of knowledge of their legal rights, and of their limited English, Elizabeth Realty principal Benjamin Shaoul barged in unannounced on tenants, threatening them with eviction if they did not move out voluntarily. He refused to make basic repairs such as leaking ceilings, and at one point cut off the supply of cooking gas for four months. He has started eviction proceedings against at least seven of the tenants, and filed a $20 million lawsuit for defamation of character against the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), which has assisted the tenants and organized last week's demonstration.

While a few of the tenants have moved out rather than endure further harassment, most have resisted because there is no place else for them to go. There is a critical shortage of affordable housing not only in Chinatown but throughout New York City, where homelessness has reached record levels in recent months.

Student teachers strike at University of Michigan

Graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor conducted a 24-hour strike Monday after bargaining failed to reach a settlement Sunday. Negotiators for U-M and the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), which represents 1,600 graduate student instructors, reached a tentative agreement on some hiring and employment practices, but the two sides had not agreed on major issues such as salary and child care.

GEO members voted last week to approve the one-day walkout with the option of going on strike March 19 if a settlement is not reached. The union staged a 36-hour walkout in March 1999 before reaching a contract settlement. The GEO, which was organized in 1975, began negotiations last October 30 for a new three-year contract. The old contract expired last month.

The GEO has asked for raises of 4.5 percent for the first year and 5 percent for each of the next two years, according to Nicole Lucier, GEO spokeswoman. U-M spokeswoman Julie Peterson said the university has offered raises of 2.5 percent in the first year and 2 percent for each of the next two years.

While management says a student instructor's median salary is about $12,800, or $18.54 an hour, the union says graduate students who work fewer hours make as little as $10.84 per hour. The GEO also is asking U-M to expand both the availability and affordability of child care.

Coca-Cola bottler sued by California workers

Nine former and current employees of Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southern California have sued the company, alleging it bilked workers out of at least $200 million in wages over the past four years. The three class-action lawsuits charge the company violated state labor laws by failing to pay proper wages, violated the law against unfair business practices, retaliated against those who tried to stop the practice and illegally modified employee time records.

The lawsuits name as defendants Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc., of Atlanta, its California subsidiaries and soft drink maker Coca-Cola Co., which is a minority owner of Coca-Cola Enterprises.

Peter Santilli, a former district sales manager at a Coca-Cola Bottling Co. sales center in Rancho Cucamonga, said he was fired after complaining that the company shaved thousands of dollars in overtime wages from the paychecks of hourly employees. Santilli alleges that he and other managers were expected to manipulate an electronic timekeeping system and edit out overtime hours worked by merchandisers, who typically earn $8 per hour restocking store shelves with Coca-Cola products. Other plaintiffs in the lawsuits claim they worked 11-hour days, only to be talked out of claiming overtime by company managers.

Last year, Coca-Cola Bottling Company paid $20.2 million to settle a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of salaried account managers and merchandisers, who had alleged the company unlawfully failed to pay them overtime wages. There are at least two similar lawsuits pending in state courts against Pepsi, Coca-Cola's chief rival in the soft drink industry.

Dayton school bus drivers union caves into anti-strike threats

The leadership of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 4, which represents 217 school bus drivers in Dayton, Ohio, caved into strikebreaking threats by the Board of Education and signed a deal last Friday, which effectively reduces workers' living standards. On February 27 the drivers, who have been without a contract for the past 14 months, voted 120-0 to authorize a walkout.

The Dayton school board, which has been pressing forward an agenda of expanding charter schools and other pro-business policies, offered drivers a pay increase of only 3 percent. The raise, however, was offset by the board's demand that each driver pay 20 percent—or about $800—more in out-of-pocket health-care expenses each year.

In preparation for a strike the school board announced it had filled all routes and was ready to transport 20,000 students. The plan reportedly included the use of city buses driven by members of the Amalgamated Transit Union. One hour after issuing this threat the school bus drivers union reached an agreement.

Union President David McFarland said he could not discuss the tentative deal but announced he was confident it would be approved. Although no details have been released, other union contracts signed with the district have included a pay freeze for teachers, clerical workers and substitute teachers, and a reduction in staff for custodians and maintenance workers.

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After strike betrayal, Alberta teachers face worsening conditions

Although over 3,500 teachers in Edmonton have continued a work-to-rule campaign, the three-week strike by most of the teachers in the province was successfully scuttled by union leaders. This has paved the way for an arbitrated settlement requested by the union, which by its terms will preclude a contract victory for teachers.

Following a meeting between Tory Premier Ralph Klein and the head of the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) Larry Booi, both sides reported a promising outcome last Monday. What has emerged, however, is that the process of binding arbitration will only deal with wage issues and the more important matters of teaching conditions and class size will be sidetracked to a special task force which will report back some time next year.

Booi, who inexplicably instructed teachers not to resume strike action last week following a court ruling allowing them to do so, declared surprise and outrage when the government announced the restrictive terms of reference for arbitration late last week. Although the specific legislation will not be announced until later this week, it is expected that teachers may well see some wage gains in an arbitrated settlement. This will nevertheless require individual school boards working within severely limited budgets to make cuts which are bound to exacerbate the very problems which drove teachers to take strike action.

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