

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 March 2002

Teachers strike in Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela

Argentina—On March 14, Argentina's Confederation of Education Workers (CTERA) organized a one-day national strike. At the same time teachers in the interior provinces of Tucuman, Chubut, San Juan, Entre Rios and Rio Negro went on strike, postponing the beginning of the school year. In oil-rich Chubut province teachers began a 15-day, 500-kilometer protest march from the city of Lago Puelo to the provincial capital Rawson, charging that the government has failed to respond to their demands.

Teachers are protesting delays in their monthly wages. In some cases they are being paid in scrip or bonds issued by bankrupt provinces. There are currently 14 different provincial currencies in circulation. In Chaco province, for instance, teachers were paid 30 percent of their February wages in federal bonds, 30 percent in provincial bonds and the rest in pesos.

In provinces where schools did open, students are being sent home hungry due to the cancellation of school lunch programs. In the city of Comodoro Rivadavia, also in Chubut, 700 teachers declared themselves on strike to protest the lack of food for their poor students, the lack of building maintenance and the late payment of wages.

Bolivia—Bolivian teachers, members of the Confederation of Urban Education Workers (CTUB), went on strike March 11 over wages. The government claims that it will not agree to wage increases beyond those already budgeted. Teachers are demanding a wage indexed to basic family food needs, currently calculated at US\$900 a month.

Venezuela—On March 13 Venezuela's teachers gave the legally required 120-hour notice of their intent to strike on March 18. They are demanding that regional wage disparities be abolished, the payment of vacation bonuses and wage increases. Venezuela's Education Minister, Aristobulo Isturiz, denounced the teachers for "being politically motivated."

Argentine unemployed demand jobs

A four-day march from different points in Argentina

culminated in a large demonstration on March 15 in front of Argentina's Government House. The National Picketers Bloc—a coalition of anarchists, Peronist elements, social democratic parties and the Communist Party—led the protest. In addition to bread and jobs, the marchers demanded the replacement of Duhalde's government with a constituent assembly. The marchers rallied at key industrial sites, demanding that former state-owned industries be renationalized and reopened.

On March 15, 4,000 workers rallied in front of the National Congress. The Argentine Workers Central (CTA), the smaller of the country's two labor federations, organized the demonstration, which coincided with a one-day strike by teachers and government employees.

Chilean postal workers strike

On March 14, 6,000 Chilean postal employees carried out a 24-hour strike to protest bonuses to post office administrators. Eleven executives shared a 75 million peso productivity bonus (about US\$115,000), even though authorities claimed that the post office had no money for workers' raises. Union leaders emphasized workers would take it upon themselves to clear a two-day backlog of mail without asking for overtime pay.

No talks in Georgia Lockheed strike

No new talks are scheduled in the strike by 2,700 machinists at Lockheed Martin's Marietta, Georgia military aircraft production facility. The strike began March 11 after the leadership of the International Association of Machinists Local 709 called on workers to reject the company's final offer. The agreement was voted down by 78 percent and the final strike vote swelled to 82 percent.

Workers at the Marietta plant are bitter at the second-class treatment they are receiving from the world's largest defense contractor, which is raking in billions from its military contracts. "We've given in to them. It's time that they stop taking," Monica Monte, a 17-year veteran told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "It's time that they start to share. We build the planes, not them."

One reason for the strike was Lockheed's attempt to

insert contract language that would facilitate the transfer of production out of the Georgia plant. The Marietta plant is 60 years old and the age of its workforce averages 53.5 years. Average seniority at the plant is 21 years. This means that a considerable portion of workers is at or near the \$45,000 yearly top pay. And while there hasn't been a strike at the plant in 25 years, it has a high grievance rate. This has Lockheed management looking to capitalize on transferring operations to another plant that would provide a cheaper source of labor.

Lockheed management has been adamant in opposing any compromise with the workers. "We've made our last, best and final offer," said company spokesman Sam Grizzle. "We have no plans to modify that proposal." Lockheed's plant chief Lee Rhyant commented, "In a free market, there is no job guarantee for any employee."

Clinics lock out health-care workers in California

West Oakland Health clinics locked out 69 health-care workers at nine separate facilities after the Service Employees International Union Local 250 called a one-day strike to protest low wages and stalled negotiations. Dr. Robert Cooper, executive director of the West Oakland Health Council, has become the target of much wrath by health-care workers. Cooper, who gets \$200,000 from the non-profit organization, is refusing to alter his offer of a 3.5 percent wage increase and move in the direction of the union's demand for a 7.5 percent increase. Workers point out Cooper himself received a 7 percent increase on top of a 3.5 percent living wage increase and a bonus.

Workers have rallied outside the Alameda County Supervisors building with bullhorns and drums to call attention to their situation. Other workers leafleted two of Cooper's Berkeley homes, handing out leaflets describing him as "anti-union" and "anti-worker."

Portland schools plan attacks on teachers to balance budget

The Portland, Oregon school district has announced it plans to freeze teachers' pay and shift a greater portion of health-care costs onto the backs of its employees. The cuts will be accompanied by a shortening of the school year by eight to nine days as the district faces a \$36 million budget shortfall.

The current teachers contract, which expires in July—stipulates raises, number of workdays and benefits. The school board will set the budget on March 18. The Portland teachers union estimates the budget will translate into a beginning teacher suffering a yearly pay cut of about \$3,000. Union President Richard Garret warned,

"It's going to be a rocky road.... Everybody knows that teachers are not overpaid, and in fact lots of people feel they are underpaid for what they do, and this is a proposal to underpay them more.... People will tell you, 'we're not going to take it.'"

Massachusetts defense contractor plans layoffs

Union officials have leaked word that Raytheon Corporation, manufacturer of the Patriot air defense missile, plans to cut 400 jobs in the coming months. The rumor fits a pattern of erosion of jobs at the Massachusetts defense contractor's network of plants that employ some 13,000 people.

In 2000, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1505 carried on a bitter strike against Raytheon. Since that time, the number of workers has shrunk from 2,700 to 2,475. This has reduced the union's annual budget from \$1.1 million to \$800,000. As a consequence the local has fallen in arrears on some \$40,000 in bills. The attempt to cut staff within the union has touched off an inter-bureaucratic struggle and various factions are squaring off for a June election to determine who will control the local's finances.

Microsoft to cut pay for Silicon Valley workers

Microsoft announced March 14 that it would reduce the differential pay for 1,600 of its Silicon Valley workers by 10 percent. During 2000, Microsoft raised the differential pay for this section of workers—who reside in one of the most expensive housing markets—from 15 percent to 25 percent in order to prevent them from bolting to other companies.

With the collapse of the high-tech sector and the onset of recession, voluntary quits at Microsoft have declined from 30 percent to 10 percent since implementing the 25 percent differential. The company is now moving to take advantage of the new conditions in the job market.



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