Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Workers disrupt oil production in Argentina

Demanding jobs, workers in the southern Argentine city of Las Heras took over the Los Perales oilfield on March 23 and 24, disrupting the production of oil and natural gas. The Spanish transnational Repsol owns the field. The protest ended after Repsol promised to come up with a "jobs plan" within two weeks to provide jobs to 400 laid-off workers. The sacking of 70 workers had sparked the protest. Las Heras authorities warned that the whole region is on the verge of a social explosion over jobs.

Volkswagen workers reject pay cut in Mexico

On March 20, Mexican autoworkers rejected a company offer of a shorter workweek, paving the way for the layoff of 350 temporary and 1,000 permanent workers within the next two years. The auto giant had offered the Union of Independent Workers of the Volkswagen Auto Industry (SITIAWV) the option of a wage cut of between 8 and 12 percent, through a shorter workweek, with no layoffs as an alternative to the layoff of 1,350 workers. Similar offers to impose the so-called "Volkswagen Week" have been recently adopted by VW workers in Brazil and Germany. SITAVW bureaucrats indicated that the workers did not trust the company's offer not to lay workers off, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

Unemployed plan new protests in Argentina

Coming out of a National Congress in Rosario on March 28, an umbrella organization of unemployed workers, the Picketer's Block (BP), announced a new plan of struggle against the government. It includes two national mobilizations, on April 4 and April 20, as well as meetings of Neighborhood Associations. "We decided that, as long as the issue of unemployed workers is not resolved, there will be no peace. We will not desist from our struggle," declared a BP leader.

Municipal workers on hunger strike in Bolivia

One hundred fifty garbage collectors employed by CLIESA, a private company contracted by the city of El Alto, are in the fortieth day of a hunger strike over $240,000 in back wages. The workers are members of the Regional Workers Central (COR) of El Alto. CLIESA management claims not to be able to pay the workers because it is owed $200,000 by the city. CLIESA President Robin Jofre suspended operations and disappeared several months ago.

COR officials are demanding the money be paid directly to the workers who have been severely weakened by the hunger strike. Municipal authorities indicate that since the workers were not employed directly by the city, they have no reason to direct their complaint to them.

Colombian death squads demand ransom for kidnapped union leader

On March 27, the Colombian military received a letter from a right-wing paramilitary group offering to negotiate the release of Gilberto Torres, a leader of the United Workers Union (USO) whom they kidnapped on February 25 in the eastern department of Casanare.

Up until now Torres was presumed dead. The fascists had threatened to "try" him for being a collaborator with left-wing guerrillas. Three months earlier, in the northern city of Barrancabermeja, USO leader Aury Sara Marruego was killed, together with his bodyguard, by another death squad.

The USO responded to Torres' kidnapping with a one-week strike against the Colombian oil company ECOPETROL. A week ago USO leader Rafael Jaimes was assassinated in Barrancabermeja and 5,000 ECOPETROL employees walked off the job. The strike is affecting production at the Barrancabermeja and Cartagena Plants (on the Caribbean coast) that refines 320,000 barrels of oil each day. Also kidnapped last week were two ECOPETROL technicians, in a jungle region of Casanare.

The Colombian United Workers Central (CUT) has called on Colombia's 800,000 public employees to strike on April 10 to protest the kidnapping and killing of union leaders. Since 1988 over 100 USO leaders have been executed. In 99 percent of these cases, no prosecutions have taken place.

Supreme Court takes away back pay for illegally fired immigrant workers

The United States Supreme Court, in a five-to-four vote, ruled that the federal government cannot require companies to issue back pay to undocumented immigrant workers who were illegally fired for supporting an effort to form a union. In 1988, Jose Castro, who entered the United States from Mexico, went to work for Hoffman Plastics Compounds Inc. In 1989 he was fired for taking part in the organizing effort by the United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum & Plastic Workers of America. In 1992 the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the company had violated federal law and ordered Hoffman to pay Castro $67,000.

In a hearing the following year Castro admitted he had entered the US "illegally" and obtained forged documents in order to secure a job. On this basis an administrative judge ruled Castro ineligible for the back pay. In 1998 the NLRB reversed that ruling and reinstated the fine.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist led a majority comprised of Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony M. Kennedy, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. Speaking on behalf of corporate interests, Rehnquist claimed the case threatened federal immigration policy. Rehnquist declared that Castro had obtained his job by "criminal fraud," ignoring what has come to light in recent cases, especially that of poultry giant Tyson Foods, where corporations are directly involved in a horrific trafficking of immigrant workers in order to obtain greater profits through low-paid labor.

Justice Stephen Breyer, writing for the minority, pointed out that the ruling would not curb illegal immigration, but that corporations, bolstered by the understanding that they could run roughshod over organizing drives, would be encouraged to pursue immigrant workers. "The Court's rule offers employers immunity in borderline cases, thereby encouraging them to take risks, i.e., to hire with a wink and a nod those potentially unlawful aliens whose unlawful employment (given the Court's views) ultimately will lower the costs of labor law violations."

Lockheed Martin executives prepare to cash in

As the strike by 2,700 machinists at Lockheed Martin's Marietta, Georgia aircraft defense plant enters its third week, the Securities and Exchange Commission reported that top executives have filed to sell hundreds of thousands of Lockheed stock valued in the millions of dollars.

Chairman and Chief Executive Vance Coffman filed to sell 358,000 shares, which he valued at $20.8 million. President and Chief Operating

Officer Robert J. Stevens filed to sell 100,000 shares, which he valued at $5.7 million. Norman Augustine, a company director, filed to sell 200,000 shares of the company's common stock. The value of Lockheed's stock closed last week at $57.58.

On March 26 Lockheed, the nation's largest defense contractor, announced its Missiles and Fire Control division won a lucrative $327 million contract from the US Army that will allow it to continue producing the Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) missiles and hardware.

Workers at the Marietta facility walked off the job March 11 protesting contract language that would allow the company to outsource manufacturing and maintenance jobs. Corporate officials stated, "In a free market, there is no job guarantee for any employee," and insist it will not alter their contract proposal.

Disney hotel workers vote to strike

More than 400 Teamsters members at two Walt Disney World hotels in Orlando, Florida voted by solid margins to strike if hotel management does not resume negotiations. Representatives for the Tishman Hotel Corporation, which owns the two complexes, responded by saying they would not revise their contract offer.

More than the question of wages, what seems to have galvanized workers to vote for a strike is the manner in which managers deny workers a 40-hour week and ignore seniority at the two hotels, named Swan and Dolphin. The hotels employ 2,000 workers. The unions currently negotiating represent housekeepers, laundry workers, seamstresses and public area attendants.

Conoco, oil refinery workers deadlock in contract talks

The union representing 669 workers at three of Conoco's oil refineries has announced it is prepared to go on strike if contracts are not reached in the next week or two. "We have little hope of reaching an agreement with Conoco," said Jim Pannell, administration vice president with the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) union.

Conoco and PACE have reached agreement on wages and benefits. But the company is seeking changes in the pattern agreement that PACE has reached with other oil refineries. Conoco wants to eliminate workers' rights to arbitrate conflicts over job reassignments and the seniority rules that stipulate the company must promote employees based on number of years served.

Contracts for Conoco plants in Commerce City, Colorado and Billings, Montana expired February 1, while the contract for Ponca City, Oklahoma expires April 1. Contract talks have been suspended at the Colorado and Montana refineries while negotiations continue in Oklahoma. No negotiations have begun at Conoco's largest refinery in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where the contract covering 300 workers will expire July 15. The company has indicated it will use management personnel and bring in skilled labor to continue production if a strike is called.

Union officials believe the decision to attack seniority is connected to a broader plan by Conoco to merge with Phillips Petroleum. The proposal, if approved by the US Federal Trade Commission, would make the Conoco-Phillips amalgamation the number three US oil company.

Maryland couple sentenced for slavery

A federal judge sentenced two residents of Silver Spring, Maryland to nine years in prison for the enslavement of a teenage female from Cameroon. The judge also ruled that Louisa Satia and Kevin Nanji, also from Cameroon, must pay the young woman $105,306 for unpaid work that she was forced to do.

The young woman, whose name has been withheld due to charges that she was sexually molested, testified that she was brought from West Africa in December 1996. In November 1999, without shoes or a coat, she ran away from her enslavers. Originally, she was told she would be a domestic servant and allowed to attend high school upon entering the US. Instead she was compelled to work at all hours for the convicted couple.

University refuses to bargain with newly unionized resident assistants

The University of Massachusetts-Amherst rejected an appeal by the newly formed union of RAs (resident assistants) to discuss the negotiations for a union contract. UMass-Amherst associate provost Susan Pearson responded by letter to RA representatives, writing, "As the University has indicated previously, we believe that the decision of the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission that led to its certification of this bargaining unit represents a misapplication of the relevant state statute...We hope the courts will reverse the decision of the labor relations commission."

The administration's sharp rebuff of the RAs' offer to negotiate and defiance of the labor board reveal wider fears than those that concern the number of RAs who have organized with the United Auto Workers. A lawyer representing the RAs has already filed no less than 13 unfair labor-practice charges against the university.

Already many campuses have been rocked by strikes and organizing drives of graduate students who serve as teachers' assistants. The UMass RAs, who provide counseling and supervision in the campus dormitories to their classmates, represent the first section of undergraduates who have visibly come into conflict with a policy pursued by universities across the US. Many working students, full- and part-time professors, staff and service workers, are treated as a cheap labor force to serve universities, with close business relations with corporate America.

Chris Fierro, a 22-year-old UMass-Amherst senior and spokesman for the RAs, told the *Boston Globe*, "Everyone thinks it is just mind-boggling that the university is going to spend more money on lawyers. There's money to fight a union, but there's no money to buy books in the library.

Strike ends at Dalhousie University

A strike by faculty and support staff at this Nova Scotia university, which lasted almost a month, ended last week when staff voted to accept a contract offer well below what they had been fighting for. While both sides claimed victory in the settlement, looking at the issue of wages alone, university officials moved little from their original demands. The Dalhousie Faculty Association had been seeking 10.8 percent in a three-year contract while the school had been offering 7.8 percent. The settlement provided an 8.5 percent raise. There were some provisions, however, for job security, maintaining full-time staff at its current level of 684 but allowing a number of contract positions. The settlement puts wage levels well below other universities of similar size across the country. Exams and class assignments will be adjusted to make up for time lost and classes resumed Monday.

Ontario public sector strike continues

The strike by 45,000 workers, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), against the Ontario Tory government is now three weeks old and there are indications that the new premier, Ernie Eves, may intervene to bring it to an end. The strike is beginning to have a serious impact, producing long delays for services such as land and vehicle transfers, government mail and the suspension of classes at special needs schools. The government has refused to return to the bargaining table, insisting that it will not increase its wage offer of 1.95 percent a year in a three-year contract, while the union is seeking at least 5 percent. A demonstration involving OPSEU workers a week ago turned violent when police clashed with protesters after the rally had all but dispersed. The attack resulted in scores of arrests and injuries.

BC doctors end job action

After two weeks of escalating their withdrawal of services, doctors across British Columbia reached a stopgap agreement with the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell over its decision to override an arbitrated settlement. Since March 13, doctors in the provincial capital of Victoria had refused to do elective surgery except in dire cases and, along with other specialists across the province, were preparing to intensify job action on April 1. Following a mid-week discussion with government negotiators they have backed down from any escalation of their action for at least a month, pending the outcome of negotiations. Along with funding cuts, their central dispute is over a government decision to reject the ruling of an arbitrator and impose a wage settlement.

The recent agreement, in principle, reportedly restores some of the provisions of the arbitrated settlement. Doctors say they will continue an administrative withdrawal, refusing to sit on hospital committees, until other outstanding issues are resolved.