

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 April 2002

Colombian oil union ends strike

The United Workers Union (USO), which represents Colombian oil workers, ended its strike against ECOPETROL, the country's national oil company, on April 6. Workers at two refineries had been on strike for several days to protest the kidnapping and murder of union leaders by right-wing death squads.

The protest strike began after the kidnapping of Gilberto Torres in the southeastern Department of Casanare and the murder of Rafael Jaimes. A human rights commission is currently negotiating with the kidnappers to free Torres. ECOPETROL's President Alberto Calderon declared that even though the company and government respect the oil workers' right to protest, the strike was causing fuel shortages across the country.

Brazilian court employees strike

Court workers employed by the federal judiciary across Brazil carried out a "National Day of Struggle" on April 4. The workers are protesting poor wages and regional pay inequities. The Union of Federal Judiciary workers (Sintrajud) is demanding that the lowest wages be adjusted upwards. The strike took place in Sao Paulo, Bahia, Ceara and Amazonas and involved nearly 100,000 court employees, 10,000 of them in Sao Paulo alone.

Mexican miners strike ended

On April 5, 650 miners at the San Martin Mine in Zacatecas ended their month-long strike, accepting a raise of 5.75 percent, the same offer they had rejected two weeks ago. Originally the union had asked for a 10 percent raise, although union leaders had signaled that they would settle for less.

Mineworkers union says negligence by safety agency contributed to deadly explosion

The United Mine Workers (UMW) charged the US Mine Safety and Health Administration of major regulatory lapses under conditions where US coal mining deaths have increased in each of the last three years. The charges appeared in a UMW letter obtained by the Associated Press through the Freedom of Information Act. It specifically called attention to a deadly September 23, 2001 incident at an Alabama mine, which occurred after rocks falling from a mine roof hit a battery charger and caused a spark that ignited methane gas. As a crew tried to rescue injured workers, a second explosion erupted, killing 13 workers.

The letter alleged that the federal mine agency employed a

policy of citing major workplace violations as minor infractions and did not review citations to see if they had been resolved. It also revealed collusion between the government and mine owners, whereby the agency hired company mine managers as federal inspectors. Under these conditions the coal operators could receive advance notice of inspections.

New talks in Lockheed Martin strike

Contract negotiations between defense contractor Lockheed Martin and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) are to resume April 10 at the request of federal mediators in Atlanta. This will be the first time that the two sides have talked since 2,700 machinists walked off the job on March 11. The strike began after workers overwhelmingly opposed the contract—despite an offer of a 10 percent wage increase and \$1,000 signing bonuses—because it contained language that opened the door to outsourcing jobs at the Marietta, Georgia plant.

Lockheed continues to assert it has made its "last, best and final offer." The IAM merely states it is "hopeful" and will "do everything we can to resolve" the strike. Strikers began to collect their first \$115 strike checks last week. The last strike at the Marietta plant took place 25 years ago and lasted 70 days.

Machinists union presses for impasse at United Airlines

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) says it is pressing federal mediators to declare an impasse in contract negotiations between United Airlines and its 23,000 ground workers. The union claims it is very close to reaching an agreement with the company and believes moving negotiations towards a 30-day cooling-down period may hasten the conclusion of talks.

Neither side has revealed the concrete issues separating them. United claims it has offered an industry-leading proposal while the IAM counters that the company is offering substandard terms to certain sections of their bargaining unit.

Should the National Mediation Board agree to call an impasse, it is expected that George W. Bush would intervene to further stall contract talks by calling for the creation of an emergency board. When all possibilities are considered, a strike may be as far off as July, which would come during the peak of summer vacation travel for the beleaguered airline, which lost \$2.1 billion last year. Bush, who engineered a multibillion-dollar bailout for the airline industry, has repeatedly stated he would not tolerate a strike against a major airline.

It appears the maneuvering by the labor bureaucracy has

more to do with protecting its own interests, including seats on the board of directors of the so-called employee-owned company. Once contact talks are concluded, the company and labor bureaucracy are expected to embark on a policy of demanding concessions to bail out the airline.

Minnesota union charges state government with retaliating against striker

A Minnesota state union official filed an unfair labor practices suit April 3 against the Department of Administration claiming management denied her request for a long overdue promotion in retaliation for her participation in the two-week strike last fall by 23,000 government workers.

Sandra Thompson applied for a promotion with the Department of Administration in June 2001 and was granted permission by her immediate supervisor. Upper management, however, stalled and in the month following the October strike told Thompson her request would be delayed due to her harassment of a fellow employee.

Thompson, president of a local unit of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE), served as a picket captain at locations around the state capital. According to the Department of Administration she questioned another employee as to whether he had participated in the strike and used the word "scab."

In a press release MAPE responded, "The Department of Administration decided that in order to punish one of our members for her strike activities, they were going to invent some reasons to discipline her and prevent her from receiving the promotion that she justly deserves for all of her hard work for the citizens of Minnesota."

Strike deadline passes at CBS

A midnight April 5 strike deadline against CBS for the Writers Guild passed without any word on whether the two sides have resolved their differences. The Guild had announced on April 4 that its members voted by a 98 percent margin to strike CBS, unless a contract were reached by the following day.

The contract originally expired on April 1, but representatives for the Guild granted the company a contract extension. The two sides remained in disagreement over a company proposal to reduce some benefits and fees. CBS also wants the right to terminate the contract should it merge with another organization, thereby allowing nonunion workers from the merger partner to perform Guild work. CBS is presently owned by Viacom.

Air Trans pilots authorize strike action

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) announced April 5 that 98 percent of union crewmembers at Air Trans voted to strike in the event contract talks fail at the Indianapolis-based carrier. Negotiations involving the 970-member bargaining unit have been in progress since May of 2000. Two months ago, Air Trans' 800 mechanics voted to be represented by the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association.

Alberta students, teachers battle anti-strike law

Hundreds of students in Alberta are facing disciplinary action from their schools following a day of protest in support of teachers who are fighting new legislation passed by the Tory provincial government, which bans teacher strikes for at least 18 months.

When teachers across the province went on strike in February the government attempted to force them back to work by declaring a public emergency, a move that was quashed by the courts. Union officials elected not to resume the strike, however, prompting the government of Premier Ralph Kline to launch this latest attack. In protest, some teachers in Calgary and Edmonton have withdrawn from extracurricular activities and other voluntary work.

Teacher unions have limited their challenge against the no strike law, dubbed Bill 12, to court action. As a result of the legislation, disputed contracts are now automatically sent to binding arbitration. Teachers have been fighting provincial cutbacks not only because they want wage and benefit improvements but also to oppose the steady deterioration of classroom conditions. Many consider the government cutbacks as the first step towards promoting the privatization of the public school system.

Transit strike looms in Toronto

Transit workers, including subway and bus drivers, could go on strike this week despite a weeklong postponement that began after their April 1 strike deadline. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has given the Toronto Transit Commission at least one further extension in hopes of coming to an agreement. The union, however, has come under increasing pressure from the membership to call a strike.

Contracts talks continued through last weekend under media blackout but disputed issues reportedly center on wages. The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is offering a 1.2 percent annual wage increase, while the union is seeking 5 percent.

Passenger traffic on the TTC has been in decline. This fall-off in ridership, combined with budget cuts, has caused a financial crunch for the public transit system in Canada's most populous city. The system carries 1.3 million riders every day and a fare increase had already been planned before the current dispute.



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