

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 April 2002

Argentine railroad strike

On April 9, a 24-hour strike shut down passenger and rail traffic throughout Argentina. The railroad workers are demanding that their wages be paid on time and in full, that cuts in passenger service be fully restored and that grade crossing safety be improved. The strike involves train operators represented by the Fraternity union (FRATERNIDAD.)

Private rail companies argue that Argentina's economic crisis has reduced ridership by 25 percent, putting them in a difficult economic position. March wages were paid in two parts, on April 5 and 10. Union representatives threatened a 48-hour strike this week if their demands are not met.

Antofagasta copper miners protest

On April 9, three miners, Felix Godoy and Manuel and Hector Morales, along with their wives shut themselves deep into a copper mine in northern Chile to demand better working conditions for contract copper miners. The couples used explosives to barricade themselves deep in the mine, while other miners at the surface surrounded the Tocopilla mine to prevent the use of force against the protesters. The miners ended their protest on April 11.

Julio Tapia, president of the Tocopilla Miners Association (AMT), said that the miners decided to bury themselves at the 1,600-meter level (about 5,200 feet) to reveal the "extreme conditions of their lives." Contract miners get paid piecework. Typically contractors deal as intermediaries with the mine owners, the Tocopilla Mining Company (COMITO), and then hire the miners. The latter do all the work and retain 40 percent of the proceeds, leaving the contractor with 60 percent. AMT miners are demanding the right to do away with the middleman and negotiate directly with the mine owners.

The governor of Antofagasta province had appealed to COMITO management, asking that a group of mines be leased directly to the miners, but negotiations stalled.

On April 11, a compromise was arrived at that satisfied the protesters for now. The National Mining Society (SONAMI), an industry association, will lease some mines directly to the miners and provide them with the equipment.

A similar protest took place in March 2000 to protest government policies against contract miners.

Striking Los Angeles school bus drivers to vote on offer

The 842 striking Los Angeles school bus drivers are expected to reject Laidlaw Education Service's three-year contract offer in a Monday vote. The strike, which began April 2, is the first by this section of workers against Los Angeles Unified School District in 30 years.

Teamsters Local 572 officials recommended rejection, citing that the average 4.6 percent wage increase offered would only apply to employees with several years seniority. The workers represent some of the most exploited sections of the workforce, making from \$8.25 to \$12.90 an hour, working split shifts, with employee-only health and welfare paid at 90 percent only after 10 years of service. The employer's pension contribution is 10 cents an hour.

On April 4, the strike was extended briefly to Atlantic Express, the second largest of five subcontractors for the district, which includes 250 drivers and 15 mechanics. The union officials worked out a quick

agreement with this company, stopping the strikebreaking.

In the meantime, LA Unified, not part of the negotiations, has assigned its own drivers, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and making \$15-22 an hour, to pick up 20,000 students, including many special education children, on the 700 affected Laidlaw routes. Sporting events and field trips have been disrupted, and delays have been over an hour for students.

Talks at Lockheed Martin break off

Federal Mediators halted unproductive talks April 11 between Lockheed Martin and union negotiators for the 2,700 machinists at the company's plant in Marietta, Georgia. Talks had restarted the previous day for the first time since members of Local 709 of the International Association of Machinists walked out on March 11.

A Lockheed Martin spokesman restated the company's position, "We stand by our last and best and final offer." Union members overwhelmingly rejected Lockheed's original offer of a 10 percent raise and a \$1,000 signing bonus due to contract language that threatened the outsourcing of jobs.

Federal mediator Fred Reebals told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, "The parties are far apart. No progress was made on any of the issues." Neither side had requested the negotiating session. Mediated talks are normally called when either side indicates it is prepared to change its position. Last week's session appeared to be aimed at trying to demoralize strikers with the prospect of a long strike.

The strike is not limited to Lockheed's Georgia plant. Workers at plants in Meridian, Mississippi and Clarksburg, West Virginia are also on strike. These two plants supply materials to Lockheed's Georgia operations.

Lockheed Martin is the nation's largest defense contractor and the Georgia plant supplies the military with the F-22 Raptor fighter jet and the C-130J transport plane.

Teachers union charges United Cerebral Palsy with unfair labor practices

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has filed Unfair Labor Practices charges against the nonprofit agency United Cerebral Palsy for bargaining in bad faith. The union has engaged in 20 months of fruitless bargaining on behalf of 600 workers.

Many of the workers earn less than \$20,000 a year and finally turned to the UFT two years ago in an effort to raise their living standards. Alan Fischer, a teacher's assistant, told the *New York Times*, "A union is necessary because we honestly don't get treated very well."

The agency counters that its \$75 million budget, which serves over 10,000 patients, is underfunded and it cannot meet the union's demands. Some 95 percent of its budget is derived from a variety of federal government funding. The UFT has rejected calling a strike out of fear it would be charged with callousness towards the agencies patients. This in turn has encouraged United Cerebral Palsy to drag its feet in negotiations.

AT&T reaches tentative agreement with unions

AT&T and the two unions representing its 27,900 workers announced April 13 they had reached a tentative 18-month agreement. The deal includes a 6 percent wage increase and an 8 percent pension hike.

The pact also contains a mechanism whereby the company agreed to 5.5 percent interest payments toward cash balance retirement accounts and

contributions to new retiree health-care accounts that are supposed to offset premiums workers will have to pay during the course of the 18-month agreement. Exact details of these health-care costs have not yet been made available.

Members of both the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers must still ratify the agreement. Should this happen, the new contract is expected to take effect on May 12.

Reuters quoted AT&T saying, "All parties said they believe a short-term contract was in the best interests of all employees in view of the uncertain economy and current conditions in the telecommunications industry." According to reports, the company wants to avoid a lengthy drawn-out contract dispute in order to hasten the sale of its cable operations to Comcast Corporation.

Minnesota nurses authorize strike

Nurses at a Minnesota hospital authorized the Minnesota Nurses Association to call a strike after contact talks bogged down April 12. The 106 registered nurses at the Fairmont Medical Center rejected an earlier tentative agreement in March after the old contract expired in January.

Nurses presently earn \$17 to \$24 an hour. Management's first two-year contract offer contained pay raises of 9 and 5 percent. If the union calls a strike, it must be preceded by a 10-day strike notification, which has not yet been declared.

Pacific mutiny exposes slave conditions on ships

The docking of a Taiwanese-owned ship in Hawaii after a mutiny has brought to light horrific conditions imposed on workers recruited to serve as cheap labor on ships. Shi Lei, a 21-year-old cook from China, stabbed the captain and first mate of the ship Full Means 2 after an argument in which he pleaded to return to China.

Shi has been charged with killing people in the act of seizing a vessel and endangering the safety of other crewmembers. If convicted, he could face the death penalty.

Defense attorneys, however, have begun to put together Shi's story. Crewmembers on the Full Means 2 earn between \$130 to \$170 a month. Shi, a rural peasant, was recruited with the understanding he would receive a \$2,000 earning fee. But this money went to the Chinese mafia, which recruits for the ship owners. Once on board ship and out at sea, Shi, and others like him, are forbidden to contact anyone for 13 months. They are subjected to beatings, rape and meager diets. Those who complain or resist their conditions are known to disappear.

Shi had been asking his captain for permission to return home to China for more than a year once he realized his earnings would not be sufficient to allow him to marry. On the day of his mutiny, he was punched at least 10 times by the captain.

The *Boston Globe* cited a report by the Australian International Commission on Shipping, entitled, "Ships, Slaves and Competition," which estimates that tens of thousands—some 10 to 15 percent of the world's ship crewmembers—work in slave-like conditions.

Wildcats force union strike at Bombardier

Nearly 8,000 employees at Bombardier Aerospace in Montreal went on strike Monday following a number of wildcat strikes through the week. While the union refused to sanction the walkouts, workers returned an overwhelming strike mandate of 91.5 percent last Saturday following a vote to reject the latest contract offer.

Over 2,500 workers took part in a wildcat strike on Friday and up to two thirds of the workforce staged spontaneous walkouts the day before when they learned details of the contract offer. Workers had been refusing to work overtime for the last two weeks and staged a one-day wildcat strike on April 1. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW), which represents the strikers, is looking for a 5 percent annual increase in a three-year contract to win parity with workers at Bombardier's competitors, Boeing, de Havilland and Rolls Royce.

They are also fighting to lower the early retirement age from 60 to 58.

The company's latest offer included 3.25 percent annual wage increase in a four-year contract and a \$1,000 signing bonus. The union would not make a recommendation on the offer, saying they would let workers decide. The membership has been working without a contract since last November 30.

The strike began at 6 a.m. Monday and affects workers at three Montreal area plants which manufacture various aircraft, including the Challenger jet. Bombardier Aerospace is a division of Bombardier Inc. and is the world's largest producer of regional jets and passenger trains and also produces ATVs, snowmobiles and personal watercraft. The last strike against the company was in 1965, when it was organized as Canadair. Orders have fallen off at the company and share values have collapsed since September 11 and the onset of recession, but the company is expecting a rise in demand this year.

Ontario public sector strike in second month

With negotiations taking place under a news blackout, 45,000 government workers are continuing their strike, which began March 13. Thousands of strikers turned out last Monday at the provincial government building at Queen's Park to demonstrate at the swearing-in ceremony of the new Ontario Premier, Ernie Eves.

Ontario Public Service Alliance (OPSEU) President Leah Casselman has said she expects the government to soften its position under Eves who was recently elected by his party on a platform of moderation and inclusiveness. "It can be a new day, or the old way. It can either be a welcoming party for a premier determined to make a difference, or it can be a continuation of the belligerent relationship perpetrated by his predecessor," Casselman said.

The union has recently claimed that management has interfered with the delivery of services by unionized court workers who, along with almost a third of the union's membership, are compelled to continue working during the strike under essential service laws. Casselman has said that the union is committed to abiding by those laws but that management's obstruction and harassment in putting lives at risk. Since the strike began their have been numerous incidents involving essential service workers who are opposed to crossing their own picket lines, an obligation the union leadership now vociferously defends.



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