

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 April 2002

Argentine oil workers threaten to strike

Workers at Argentina's oil companies could strike indefinitely as a result of management's decision to carry out layoffs because of a 20 percent rise in oil export taxes. On April 17, Union of Oil Workers (FASPYGP) leader Alberto Roberti announced that the possible 1,500 layoffs by YPF-Repsol were unacceptable.

Another week of protests in Argentina

Over 100 public employees occupied the legislature of San Juan province on April 17 to protest the nonpayment of wages. State workers and teachers have also taken over the ministries of education, health and economics, as well as public hospitals. The Argentine federal government is demanding that San Juan cut its budget by 240 million pesos.

The province owes its employees more than 25 million pesos, or about \$8 million, in back pay. One-third of its labor force, or 30,000 public employees, have yet to be paid their February and March wages. In addition, 25 percent of January's wages are still owed. Unemployment is close to 25 percent, and economic activity is down 50 percent.

San Juan, typical of many provinces, has virtually ceased functioning. Public hospitals lack supplies. School lunches are no longer being served. Nearly daily strikes have contributed to a breakdown in sanitation and other essential services.

In the city of La Plata, south of Buenos Aires, workers from the Rio Santiago shipyard battled the police on April 17. Army infantry attacked the workers with tear gas and rubber bullets as they attempted to assemble in front of the provincial legislature to demand their March wages.

In Cordoba, Argentina's second-largest city, more than 15,000 striking teachers marched against a draft law that attacks their pensions. The Cordoba Educators Union (UEPC) says that under the draft legislation 6,000 of the province's 45,000 educators would be automatically retired.

In the provinces of Neuquen, Santa Cruz and Catamarca, union workers, teachers and unemployed workers demonstrated, demanding relief for the unemployed and job creation policies.

In the city of Lanus, an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires, an unidentified person on a motorcycle shot an unemployed picket in the chest at close range. The nine-millimeter bullet is consistent with the weapons used by Buenos Aires prison guards. The pickets were protesting in front of the city hall to demand the payment of government relief checks owed since last December.

Venezuelan and Chilean health workers' protests

Workers at the Boliviano-Holandes Hospital have declared a state of emergency and called for job actions to defend health-care conditions. Health workers report that the government ignored a March 6 agreement on wages and working conditions, which resulted from a 17-day national hunger strike.

The workers are demanding that the agreement be fully implemented, including premium pay for overtime and Saturday work.

In the Chilean city of Renca, employees of three clinics began a hunger strike to protest stonewalling by health authorities to negotiate a solution to a weeklong strike by 300 workers. The National Confederation of Municipal Health Workers (CONFUSAM) denounced the lack of progress in the strike.

Six arrests in Valparaiso longshore protest

Six workers were arrested on April 19 during a protest at the Chilean port of Valparaiso, the country's largest port. The workers were demanding that the Lagos administration carry out severance agreements that resulted from the port's privatization.

Several years ago the government had agreed to a seven million peso fund to help small businesses set up by laid-off dockworkers in exchange for their union's approval of the privatization of ports. Since then the fund has been cut to 3 million pesos.

The workers rallied in front of their local and blocked nearby avenues. Police aggressively attacked the 20-minute protest with tear gas and water cannon. Then they arrested six workers, including a union representative who was answering questions at the press conference.

Colombian dairy workers strike

On April 19, 350 union workers employed by Cicolac, a Nestle subsidiary in Colombia, voted to strike over the lack of progress in negotiations. The workers are demanding a 15 percent raise, protection for union members and health-care facilities dedicated to poor children. Contract negotiations began on February 28. The company processes 450 million liters of milk daily and is supplied by dairies from throughout eastern Colombia.

Teachers strike in Honduras

Teachers in the Honduran city of Cortes have decided to sue the government in the Court for International Justice of the International Labor Organization (ILO) for violating their rights and repressing protests. The teachers also decided to begin a national strike on April 25, which would involve 60,000 educators.

Eulogio Chavez, president of the Confederation of Honduran Education Workers (COPEMH), said, "We are determined to fight to force the government to carry out its own statutes and to force the resignation of the education minister. We intend to march and go on hunger strikes."

He denounced the government's disinformation campaign, which said that teachers had been given a 330 percent raise during the last contract instead of the actual 69 percent they received. Honduran elementary teachers earn a little over \$200 a month.

Brazilian trade unions launch a wage offensive

The Central Union of Sao Paulo workers (CUT-SP) launched a wage offensive on April 19 involving 30 categories of workers and promised strike action if "the state does not show good faith in negotiations," announced CUT-SP President Carlos Spis. He reported that real wages for Sao Paulo workers have dropped by an average of 22 percent since 1994.

Spis said that the union was unifying wage demands covering 14 categories of public and 16 categories of private sector workers, about 300,000 workers in all. At a union rally, he warned negotiations this year would be difficult.

Workers march against Uruguayan government

On April 17, more than 100,000 people marched in Montevideo to call for an end to the four-year recession that afflicts Uruguay. Some management groups were involved in calling the massive protest. The marchers chanted slogans and carried signs demanding that President Jorghe Batlle impose emergency measures to end the long economic downturn.

Five columns of marchers entered the city from various parts of the

country's interior. Some workers had begun marching nine days earlier.

While dwarfed by neighboring Argentina's economic depression, Uruguay's economy has been in crisis since 1998. Unemployment is 14.4 percent, and economic activity is down by 4 percent. In a sign of submission to the International Monetary Fund, the Batlle administration has opted for austerity policies—cuts in government programs and increases in taxes—that are sure to increase the severity of the economic slump. While carrying out IMF requirements, Batlle vowed that Uruguay would not be the next Argentina.

Cleveland area teachers strike

School Board members in East Cleveland left an April 17 meeting under police escort after being castigated by district residents for their role in the three-day-strike by 461 teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists and librarians. The majority of the audience backed the teachers and demanded that the board settle the strike, threatening to vote them out of office if they didn't.

The East Cleveland Education Association has asked for 6 percent yearly raises during the course of a three-year contract. Negotiators for the district have offered 2 percent per year. In reply to the teachers' demands, school board superintendent Elvin Jones commented, "The teachers will be out there for a long, long time because we will not give them a 6 percent raise. We can't afford it, and that's all there is to it." Threatening the teachers, Jones also announced, "You have to realize when teachers are out, they will be docked at their per-diem rate, and if they stay out past May 1, benefits will be cut off."

Earlier that day teachers were enraged when a van full of strikebreakers struck a teacher picketing outside Mayfair Middle School.

Hershey workers reject contract

Some 3,000 workers at two Hershey Foods Corporation plants in Pennsylvania rejected a contract offer April 16. Chocolate Workers Local 464, a unit of the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, could have launched a strike in 72 hours, but news sources indicate that union and management are preparing to meet with a federal mediator this week to prevent a walkout.

While exact details are unknown, Local 464 has indicated that the two sides remain separated on issues of health care and wages. Workers have been working without a contract since last November. Management has made known it has contingency plans to deal with a strike.

The day after workers rejected the company offer, Hershey announced first quarter profits rose 10 percent and net income rose to \$87 million. The two Pennsylvania plants account for less than 40 percent of the company's production and one-fifth of its workforce. Hershey's, known for its "Kisses" chocolates and several popular candy bars, is the largest US chocolate maker.

New mediated talks in Lockheed strike

Lockheed Martin and the International Association of Machinists will resume negotiations under the supervision of the National Mediation Board as the strike by 2,700 machinists at the company's Marietta, Georgia plant enters its seventh week. After the announcement on April 18, a company spokesman reiterated, "We stand by our last, best and final offer." Nothing was achieved during two days of talks on April 10-11.

Last week management personnel and nonunion workers finished production on two new F-22 fighter jet test models, which were only partially completed when workers walked out on strike. Workers struck the world's largest defense contractor on March 11 rejecting management's attempt to insert contract language allowing the further outsourcing of jobs.

United Airlines posts loss as talks continue with ground workers

As contract talks with its 23,000 ground workers continue, UAL Corporation, the parent company of United Airlines, reported a first quarter loss of \$487 million. This comes on top of a \$2.1 billion loss for all of 2001.

Ground workers, members of the International Association of Machinists, are attempting to recoup concessions given up by the union leadership in the early 1990s. The IAM has asked the National Mediation Board to declare an impasse in negotiations and allow ground workers to strike.

According to *Business Week*, United may have to apply for federal loan guarantees in order to continue operating. The deadline is June 28. But the federal government will not release the money if it is primarily used to pay wage increases to United's workforce.

Chief executive John Creighton attempted to put a brave face on the carrier's financial situation, declaring, "We certainly are seeing signs that our industry's situation is beginning to improve, but there still is a long way to go." Citing the ongoing negotiations with the IAM, Creighton said, "However, complications with negotiating open labor contracts have impeded our progress on reducing salary and other operating costs."

Union contract at McDonald's in Quebec

Workers at a McDonald's fast food franchise north of Montreal have won the first union contract with the company in North America and the second in the world. After more than a year of bitter negotiations the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) of Montreal signed the deal only six weeks after a union in France won a contract with McDonald's after six months on strike.

The unionized McDonald's franchise is located in the town of Rawdon, north of Montreal in the Laurentian Mountains, and employs around 25 workers. A number of other outlets in North America have won union certification in recent years, but were never able to get a contract. In most cases the company closed the franchises before a contract could be signed.

The terms of the agreement will give workers a base wage of \$7 an hour and a 10 cents an hour raise for every six months on the job. Union spokesman Jean Lortie said that "It's not a very good deal, but it's a start. This is the first time that everybody will get the same wage. There will be no favoritism." McDonald's typically pays minimum wage to its mostly younger with small increases based on employee performance. Since most of the franchises are privately owned, each outlet has had to fight for a separate union contract. McDonald's Restaurants of Canada Limited operate more than 1,200 restaurants with more than 77,000 workers across the country.



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