

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 April 2002

## Social protests in Argentina

Three-thousand unemployed workers marched on the Plaza de Mayo, across from Argentina's government house, on April 25 in a peaceful protest demanding President Duhalde resign.

In the city of Viedma, 900 kilometers south of Buenos Aires, about 2,000 teachers and public employees protested against delays in pay outside the Rio Negro provincial legislature. The police used tear gas and rubber bullets when protesters tried to enter the building.

The police continued attacking as the demonstration attempted to march toward the Education Council of Rio Negro Province. Teachers union leaders vowed to continue pressing for back wages. Many teachers, owed back wages from February and pension payments since last year, have been on strike since the school year began in March. For its part, the Public Employees Association declared a 24-hour strike for April 26.

Rio Negro Province is virtually at a standstill. In addition to teachers and public employees on strike, the health sector is also paralyzed. All of its public hospitals are virtually shut down due to a lack of supplies and unpaid wages to employees.

In the city of Rawson, 500 kilometers to the south and provincial capital of the province of Chubut, striking teachers established a siege around the provincial legislature for two days. They blocked deliveries of gas and food, preventing the 27 legislators from leaving the building until they passed a law reestablishing teachers' seniority bonuses. The legislature also agreed not to penalize teachers for the days of the strike.

## Chilean dock workers continue protests

On April 22, 40 dock workers at the Chilean Port of San Antonio burned tires and protested a deal between their unions and the Lagos government to find a solution to the region's economic. The workers are demanding an expansion of the port facilities to accommodate larger ships.

## Colombian coal miners demand security, education and higher wages

On May 1, 1,300 miners employed by the Drummond coal mine in Colombia will take a strike vote. Negotiations on a new contract are stalled. "The company is only interested in revising part of the current contract, making offers that are laughable," said Miguel Munoz, leader of the miners union (SINTRAMIENTERGETICA).

SINTRAMIENTERGETICA is demanding relocation of the miners' camps to a site protected from paramilitary death squads, better educational benefits for their children and higher wages. In one year, three top union leaders have been assassinated by the fascist Colombian United Self Defense (AUC).

Currently Drummond's education benefits only cover one child per miner. SINTRAMIENTERGETICA is demanding that three children be covered. It is also asking that a new elementary school be built in the Caribbean coal port of Cienaga and that electrical services be upgraded in the community.

The miners consider their demands reasonable and affordable, given the highly profitable nature of Drummond's *Corregimiento la Loma* mine in the Department of Cesar in Northeastern Colombia. The company earns net profits of three-quarters of a million dollars daily from the export of 36,000 tons of coal.

## Brazilian Ericsson workers fight layoffs

The Sao Jose dos Campos metal workers union denounced cellular phone company Ericsson's plans to lay off 60 workers in April. Union leader Edmir Marcolino declared that Flextone and LSI Logistica, two of Ericsson's suppliers, also plan to lay off another 170 workers by year's end.

In the last two months the Sao Paulo area telecommunications industry has sacked 240 workers. "Last year Ericsson had 1,200 employees; today it is down to 350," said Marcolino. On April 27 an assembly of workers authorized a strike to pressure Ericsson not to carry out the layoffs.

## Two-day teachers strike in Ecuador

Ecuador's 120,000 public school teachers struck on April 24 and 25 to protest a privatization scheme for the nation's public schools. The teachers union (UNE) warned that teachers would strike again unless the draft project is scrapped. According to the union, the new law would transfer the schools to the municipalities, which is one step from privatization since the cities have declared bankruptcy.

On April 25, teachers marched in protest through the streets of Quito. Police blocked them on their way to the Carondelet Palace, Ecuador's government house, and also repressed a solidarity rally by students in Quito's Central University.

## Guatemalan unions announce May Day demands

Among the demands workers will present to the Government of Alfonso Portillo on May 1 will be the rehiring of all those laid off from the National Mortgage Credit Bank, the forest service and highway construction. They will also demand that all workers in the private sector laid off due to mismanagement be reinstated, including the 71 workers illegally fired by Dymel SA three years. The workers, who won a court order to be rehired, have been on hunger strike for more than 100 days.

## Construction workers strike in Panama

On April 24, Panama's Construction Workers Union (SUNTRACS) initiated strike action over wages in a national construction contract. The union announced that in negotiations 48 hours previous to the strike all major issues in the contract had been resolved except for wages. The union is demanding that helpers' wages be raised by four cents an hour and that journeymen be granted a five cent raise each year of the contract.

## Lockheed strikers to vote on tentative agreement

Striking Lockheed Martin machinists voted Sunday on a three-year tentative agreement aimed at bringing a seven-month strike by 2,700 machinists at the Marietta, Georgia plant to a conclusion. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) declined to make details of the proposal public.

Workers soundly rejected the company's last proposal containing contract language that opened the door to outsourcing. Press reports indicate that the new agreement contains the 10 percent wage increases and the \$1,000 signing bonus of the previous proposal. New provisions are supposed to protect maintenance workers from losing their jobs to lower-paying subcontractors and require negotiations with the IAM if work is outsourced.

"Definitely, the contract proposal that we turned down would have meant layoffs of people working in the plant, direct layoffs because of that," said an IAM spokesperson. He claimed the latest tentative pact averts that. But according to other reports, the contract does not contain

language that guarantees the security of jobs at the Georgia plant.

As talks entered the final stages last week, Lockheed, the largest US military defense contractor, reported its first quarter profit more than doubled to \$218 million. It also maintained its forecast that profits will stay on target for the rest of the year.

If Georgia strikers ratify the agreement, another 150 Lockheed workers on sympathy strike at supplier plants in Meridian, Mississippi and Clarksburg, West Virginia will also return to work.

#### **Tentative agreement reached with ground workers at United Airlines**

United Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) reached a tentative agreement April 25 covering 23,000 baggage handlers, customer service agents and other ground workers that will raise wages by 29 percent over the next two years. "It's a fair and equitable agreement that treats everyone well," said one IAM spokesperson.

In earlier talks the IAM complained that United's offer shortchanged certain sections of its bargaining unit. The present proposal provides an immediate 7 percent increase once the contract is ratified, followed by two 3.5 percent increases leading up to a 2004 expiration. Base pay for a ramp worker would increase to \$25.06 an hour and a customer service agent will go from an hourly base pay of \$19.74 to \$26.02.

The contract also calls for 15 percent pay raises retroactive to July 2000. These raises will be doled out in eight quarterly payments starting in December 2002. Rank-and-file workers will begin voting on the proposal in two or three weeks.

"These agreements provide recovery for United's front-line employees," IAM District 141 president and lead negotiator Randy Canale told the *Denver Post*. "We kept our promise to restore wages and benefits for thousands of employees who made sacrifices to support this airline during the past eight years."

What the IAM is not saying is that before the ink has dried on the present contract, should it pass, they will then sit down to discuss concessions with United. The ground workers were the last section of union workers to conclude contract talks. Pilots and flight attendants are already holding concession talks in the wake of a \$2.1 billion loss for 2001 and \$510 million loss for the first quarter of 2002.

#### **Chocolate workers strike**

About 2,800 workers at two Hershey Foods Corporation plants in Pennsylvania walked out on strike April 26 after negotiations failed to reach an agreement on wages and health-care issues. "We feel like there's too much greed at the top and they're not sharing with the rest of us," a member of the Chocolate Workers Local 464 told the Associated Press.

A Hershey's spokesperson announced, "Pretty much everything that's made at those two plants is also made at other Hershey facilities. We have appropriate plans in place so we can meet our customers' expectations."

Several chocolate products, including Hershey's Kisses, are made at the plant. It accounts for some 25 percent to 40 percent of production, depending on whether you ask the company or the union. But the company has 12 other plants, including a nonunion operation in the town of Hershey, Pennsylvania where the present strike is situated. The company has \$220 million in the bank and has stockpiled \$30 million in product beyond its normal production quotas in order to take on its workforce.

Workers, who average about \$18 an hour, rejected a deal that offered yearly raises of 2.78 percent, 2.6 percent, 2.65 percent and 2.75 percent. Workers not only want an improved wage offer, but are also upset that the company will not make the contract retroactive to November 2001, when the previous contract expired.

#### **Talks in East Cleveland teachers strike**

Negotiators for the East Cleveland Education Association and the school district met behind closed doors last week in an effort to conclude a strike by 461 teachers and other staff workers who walked off the job April 15.

According to news reports the two sides made progress on closing their differences, including the issue of wages. Picket line confrontations and a stormy school board meeting that resulted in board members having to exit under police protection reflect deep divisions in the community. The federal mediator who is brokering talks is reported to have said the negotiations are the most difficult in his 18-year career.

#### **Northwest Airlines reaches agreement with pilots union**

Northwest Airlines reached a tentative agreement with the Air Line Pilots Association and its 6,000 pilots. The present contract was set to expire in September 2002. The present proposal is seen as a stopgap agreement that seeks to avoid a confrontation during the present downturn in the airline industry. It extends the old agreement by one year while providing a 4.5 percent raise this fall followed by a 5.5 percent increase in September of 2003.

ALPA union officials are backing the tentative pact on the grounds that the economy will be more favorable in 2003 for negotiations. The agreement came just nine days after Northwest announced a \$171 million loss for the first quarter of 2002. Northwest pilots trail their counterparts at United Airlines, where the pilots' union has begun concession negotiations aimed at bailing out the financially troubled airline.

#### **Detroit-Windsor tunnel workers strike**

Workers for the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel were locked out of their jobs April 24 after refusing to accept a 3.5 percent pay cut. Toll collectors, traffic guards and janitors, all members of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1564, voted 25-3 to reject management's offer that contained contested issues such as contract length, salary levels and wage increases for new hires.

In 2001, the MacQuarie Bank of Australia purchased the corporation that operates the underground tunnel connecting Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan, which are separated by the Detroit river. The two cities own the tunnel.

#### **City workers strike in Minnesota town**

Workers went on strike against the city of Mounds View, Minnesota April 24, to demand parity with other city workers in the state. Mary Tatrek, a 22-year accountant and president of the local, told the Associated Press, "We want the same benefits other unions have."

One bone of contention is the city's refusal to rehire 15 golf course workers. The 28 strikers, comprised of clerical workers, building inspectors and seasonal workers at the municipal golf course, joined the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 14 last August.

#### **Ontario government strike heats up**

Forty-five thousand public service workers across the province, on strike since March 13, are growing increasingly frustrated with both their leadership and government negotiators. Despite the conciliatory promises of the new Ontario premier, Ernie Eves, strikers have been bombarded with at least 130 orders from the Ontario Labour Board to limit picketing. In addition, the leadership of their union, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) had, until recently, been virtually silent on the progress of contract talks while allowing at least one-third of its members to continue working under essential service requirements.

Last Wednesday over 100 striking protesters tried to force their way into the Ontario legislature at Queens Park where the premier and his cabinet were meeting, but were blocked by riot and mounted police patrolling outside. The union has lifted the news blackout on talks, but revealed that there had been little progress in reaching a settlement. Central issues in the dispute are wages, job security and control of employee pensions. The union has cut its wage demand by more than half, seeking a 2.5 percent yearly increase. But the government has maintained its offer of 1.95 percent, with further increases for "productivity and efficiency."

OPSEU President Leah Casselman has responded to rank-and-file pressure with a futile appeal to Premier Eves to meet directly with the

union to bring an end to the strike. The anger and frustration of the strikers has drawn the attention of leaders from other unions across the province, who made a similar plea in a letter delivered last Friday to the premier's office. Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Wayne Samuelson said, "Here's the test. We want the government to get back to the bargaining table and quit using the courts to fight 45,000 OPSEU members, their own government employees."

At a meeting last week, union leaders expressed alarm at reports that the new government, which had pledged to be less confrontational, is drafting legislation to end the seven-week-old strike.

#### **Talks on, then off in Bombardier strike**

Contract talks in the two-week-old strike by 7,500 Bombardier workers in Montreal broke off on Friday when the company left the bargaining table. Negotiations had resumed for only one day after the Quebec government intervened by appointing an arbitrator to help settle the dispute.

Bombardier is one of the largest manufacturers of civil aircraft and snowmobiles in the world and the strike has idled three major plants in the Montreal area. The company said it broke off negotiations due to unacceptable wage demands by the union. They are offering wage increases of 3.25 percent a year in a four year contract while the union is seeking a 5 percent a year wage increase and a reduction in the retirement age from 60 to 58.

The government had appointed an arbitrator last Tuesday to restart talks, which broke off when the strike began April 15. Despite separate consultations with both parties, talks quickly collapsed when the two sides were brought together at the bargaining table. Workers at Bombardier have been without a contract since last November and over 2,000 have been laid off since the beginning of the year.



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