Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 June 2002

Sao Paulo universities threaten to strike

Employees at three public universities in Sao Paulo may strike indefinitely beginning June 10, the date set at a May 29 meeting of the two unions representing professors and university employees. The workers rejected an 8 percent wage increase. They are insisting on an immediate 9.68 percent hike, followed by another raise, adding up to 16 percent by September.

"Our people are determined to strike," said Alexandre Parriol Filho, director of the Sao Paulo University Workers Union (SINTUSP).

University employees in Minas Gerais have been on strike for 20 days. Governor Itamar Franco has threatened to fire university professors who are not back to work on June 3.

Powerful strike in Argentina

On May 29 the government of Eduardo Duhalde was confronted with strikes and the biggest popular protest in several years. The Argentine Workers Congress (CTA) organized hundreds of street and highway blockades across the country, demanding a new economic policy. Buenos Aires was totally isolated by CTA pickets who blockaded all highway access to the capital.

No major confrontations with the police were reported, except in Neuquen and Entre Rios, where Molotov cocktails were hurled. In Neuquen a Citibank branch office exploded. In Entre Rios, the governor's office was set on fire. In La Plata, capital of Buenos Aires Province, teachers confronted the police, but there were no arrests or casualties.

The strike was called to coincide with the thirty-third anniversary of the *Cordobazo* (the 1969 workers' mass protest that helped overthrow the Ongania dictatorship). However, participation in the strike itself was spotty except for in Buenos Aires, Rosario and Mar Del Plata, where traffic was paralyzed.

Communications workers threaten to shut down Ecuador's World Cup coverage

Workers at the publicly owned Andinatel communications company threatened to suspend World Cup coverage unless their demands for decent wages and job security are met. Andinatel has begun a modernization project that threatens 800 jobs.

Union leader Geovanny Cabrera announced that layoffs were unacceptable. "If they lay off any one of our members, we will strike," said Cabrera. The union plans to begin shutting down broadcasts on the evening of June 3.

Venezuelan teachers to strike June 10

Public school teachers in Venezuela are set to strike for 72 hours on June 10 if negotiations fail with the Education Ministry. Omar Escalante, executive secretary of the Venezuelan Federation of Education Workers (FETRAENSENANZA), said teachers face a crisis in their living conditions. Among the teachers' demands are wage increases, improvements in health benefits and an increase in government contributions to pensions.

Hotel strike continues in Disney World

The Teamsters union filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board May 28 against two hotels owned by Tishman Hotel Corporation at Walt Disney World charging hotel management with illegally photographing striking workers on the picket line and attempting to coerce them into signing forms that would amount to voluntary resignation.

"The company has decided to jerk them around a little," said Teamsters Local 385 President Mike Stapleton, one day into a strike by 400 housekeepers, laundry workers, seamstresses and public area attendants against the Swan and Dolphin hotels. Many of the workers are non-English-speaking Haitian and Hispanic immigrant workers.

The union also charges that management is preventing workers from picking up their last paycheck in person and is instead insisting on mailing out checks. Many hotel workers do not have permanent addresses.

Workers rejected two tentative agreements prior to their decision to strike the hotels. Management has now unilaterally implemented its final offer on those workers who have crossed picket lines. Striking workers are demanding a guaranteed 40-hour workweek, job assignments based on seniority, wage increases adjusted for inflation and contract provisions to protect them from cuts in medical benefits.

New talks in Chicago Pepsi strike

Contract talks between the soft-drink bottler PepsiAmericas and Teamsters Local 744 will resume this week as the walkout by 300 delivery drivers who service the Chicago area enters its third week.

Workers are opposing company plans to gut working conditions. PepsiAmericas wants to eliminate helpers who accompany drivers, allow management personnel to do union work, and terminate the role that drivers have played as salespersons to venders. By taking this away, the company can eliminate the commissions it pays to drivers. It plans instead to implement a policy of pre-selling its product by other means.

Management flown in from other locations, along with temporary replacement workers, continue to deliver products. PepsiAmericas is the number two bottler for the soft drink maker PepsiCo.

Lecturers strike University of California-Davis

Lecturers at the University of California-Davis, located between Sacramento and San Francisco, picketed for three days last week to protest the slow pace of negotiations. They charge that the university is preparing to implement policies that will undermine the quality of academic training at the campus.

Some 80 lecturers joined by students set up picket lines and shut down classes on the campus. Contract talks have been dragging on for two years without results. The lecturers claim UC Davis plans on cutting writing, foreign language and economic aspects of the university's curriculum. The university says it will use tenured professors to replace lecturers.

Sara Lee Foods settles racial harassment suit in Philadelphia

Sara Lee Foods Corporation announced it would pay $3.5 million to settle a racial harassment suit with 139 black workers who were formerly employed at its Philadelphia hotdog plant. The suit charged that the workers were subjected to racial slurs, racist cartoons and graffiti, denied promotions, forced to take on larger workloads than white counterparts and compelled to submit to frequent drug testing.

Workers charged that white employees who used racial slurs, and even donned hoods and paraded themselves as Klansman in the plant, were either not disciplined or given mild admonitions by management. Black workers also charge that they were retaliated against when the plant was closed last year.

Workers said that the harassment escalated sharply after Sara Lee

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purchased the plant from Hygrade Food Products Corporation during the 1990s.

Another big Las Vegas casino settles with union

The union representing Las Vegas casino workers settled another contract May 24, this time with the giant MGM Mirage gambling house. Like the other contracts settled with Mandalay Resort Group, Park Place Entertainment, Harrah's Entertainment and the Tropicana, the MGM agreement calls for a $3.23 increase in wages and benefits and does not seek to make workers pay for health benefits as it and other casinos initially sought.

Some 35,000 of the 47,000 workers represented by Culinary Local 226 and Bartenders Local 165 have reached settlements. The remaining unsettled contracts involve smaller gambling houses on the Las Vegas strip and in the downtown area. Contracts expired May 31.

Arbitrators award United flight attendants a raise

A panel of arbitrators ruled that flight attendants at United Airlines have salaries that average less than their counterparts at other large carriers and awarded them $48 million. The award will be incorporated into talks this week between company officials and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), which represents United's 26,000 flight attendants.

On average, the arbitrators' decision will translate into a 7.5 percent raise, retroactive to April 1, 2002. The AFA has hinted there is pressure from workers to seek additional compensation for flight attendants. "While the money will mean a much-deserved raise, it only brings our flight attendants up to the average of United's competitors," said AFA union executive Greg Davidowitch.

Accounting firm covers for union embezzlement scheme

The accounting firm of Thomas Havey LLP is under the spotlight for allegedly covering up the embezzlement of funds from the Iron Workers union. Havey, which has hundreds of union clients, helped former Iron Workers vice-president Raymond Robertson to conceal the embezzlement of more than $350,000 by his daughter, Kerry Tresselt, who served as the bookkeeper for the union's Apprenticeship Training and Journeyman Upgrading Fund. A Havey auditor found that payroll checks had been issued to Tresselt's husband, who held no position with the fund.

However, neither Robertson nor the Havey partner in charge of the audit informed the fund's board of directors of the fraud, instead affirming that the fund's accounts were in good order. This practice continued from February 1999 until May 2001.

Robertson has pled guilty and been charged with eight felony counts of conspiracy, aiding and abetting embezzlement and embezzlement. He must pay a $30,000 fine and $103,000 in restitution. His daughter pled guilty to four counts of conspiracy and embezzlement.

However, Thomas Havey LLP has not yet been charged in the affair. "Labor is our specialty," says the firm. It claims to audit "over 700 collectively bargained, multi-employer and single-employer plans with total assets of over $42 billion."

Protestors denounce BC Liberals

Some 30,000 protestors marched through Vancouver May 25 to express their opposition to Gordon Campbell's British Columbia Liberals. Since coming to power in May 2001, the BC Liberals have brazenly championed the interests of the ruling class—by way of a wide range of cuts to public programs, and legislation tilting working conditions in favor of employers.

Some protesters held signs with the slogan "Prepare the General Strike!" BC Government and Service Employees Union President George Heyman, responding to the demands for militant action, commented, "I think that's very dangerous because when the legitimate democratic avenues of protest are shut down, people get more and more disturbed. I think you'll see more and more unrest. You'll not only see protests, I think ultimately you'll see people, especially working people, taking to the streets and withholding their labor."

The union bureaucracy is seeking to dissipate the anger of the province's millions of working people who have been hard hit by the policies of the Liberals and their NDP predecessors.

Toronto regional rail workers on strike

Over 130 maintenance workers employed at the commuter train service "Go Transit" walked off the job last week beginning what may prove to be a long and bitter standoff. The striking workers are actually employed by the manufacturing giant Bombardier Transportation, whose parent company in Quebec has been involved in a bitter contract battle in recent weeks

The workers are members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1587 and are fighting for improvements in wages and working conditions. Workers rejected the company's latest offer to increase wages by between 9 and 13 percent over three years. The union is asking for increases of up to 15 percent in the first year alone. Workers in a different local of the same union have continued to work despite the strike and, so far, disruption to commuter traffic has been minimal. No new talks have been scheduled in negotiations and Gordon Chong, the chairman of Go Transit, is appealing to the provincial government to have the rail line declared an essential service, thereby stripping workers of the right to strike.

Navistar workers strike against pay cut

Eight hundred workers, members of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 127, walked out June 1 at a Navistar heavy truck assembly plant in Chatham, Ontario to oppose the company's demands for a sharp reduction in wages and benefits. On April 5 the company sent out a "consideration to close" letter to the CAW, demanding cost-cutting measures totaling $28 million to make the plant "competitive." The cutbacks include wage concessions of $6 per hour for production workers and $4 per hour for trades employees.

In mid-May workers voted 98 percent in favor of strike action. The walkout began midnight Friday after the expiration of the contract. Navistar has shifted production to its plant in Escobedo, Mexico to undermine the effectiveness of the strike.

GM workers oppose union-management deal on Quebec plant closing

Employees at General Motors Canada's Boisbriand, Quebec plant decided Sunday not to vote on an agreement reached last week between management and the Canadian Auto Workers union for severance packages at the plant, where production is scheduled to end August 29. The offer—which gives employees at least 50 years of age and with at least 30 years of seniority an improved pension and a $50,000 bonus—affected only 578 out of 1,400 employees at the GM plant just north of Montreal.

The CAW had claimed the agreement was a victory because GM promised not to demolish the factory for at least one year after its production line shuts down. Workers loudly voiced their anger at the deal Sunday by refusing to vote on the offer. Sylvain Demers, president of the local CAW chapter, acknowledged, "Even if we succeeded in making minor improvements to the consequences of the layoffs at GM, there are still many workers who will lose whatever they've got."

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