Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 June 2002

Mass opposition to privatization in Peru

Mass protests rocked Arequipa, Peru after the government announced the sale of two state electric utilities to a Belgian firm. The demonstrations began on June 15 and intensified the following day. Thousands of demonstrators rallied in Arequipa's main square, chanting slogans against Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo. During the recent campaign for president, Toledo had promised in writing not to privatize the electric utilities in Arequipa and in Tacna, a city on the border with Chile. Protesters blocked access to government buildings and occupied the airport in an attempt to prevent the landing of special government troops being sent to quell the protests.

Over 250 demonstrators set fire to tires on the runways and stood on the runway to block airplanes from landing. On Saturday the National Police forced an end to the airport occupation. Stranded tourists reported a brutal confrontation between the police and protesters, who were attacked with intensive tear gas barrages.

One-day national strike in Uruguay

On June 12 Uruguay was paralyzed by a 24-hour general strike organized by the national trade union federation (PIT-CUT) to protest austerity measures imposed by President Jorge Batlle under orders from the International Monetary Fund.

This is the first 24-hour strike in the 15 months Batlle has been in power. Its effect was felt mostly in the banking, transportation and manufacturing sectors. The strike was also widely observed among public employees. The new austerity measures include higher taxes on wages and pensions and a value-added tax on services, such as transportation, which up to now had been exempt.

Transit workers strike in Santiago

Nearly 800 subway maintenance workers and ticket sellers, employees of the Santiago subway system, went on strike June 12 over wages. The workers are angry at the Lagos government, which has stood by while Santiago Metro presses for contract concessions by the union.

Outside contractors and supervisory personnel are replacing the 764 strikers. Subways continue running with 500 non-striking employees, including train operators, whose union is boycotting the walkout. Seven hundred thousand riders use the Santiago metro every day.

Postal strike in the Dominican Republic

Eight-hundred letter carriers are in the third week of a strike in the Dominican Republic. The letter carriers are demanding that the post office pay them two months back wages.

The letter carriers have been rallying every day of the strike in front of post office headquarters. While only the letter carriers are on strike, other postal workers indicated they are also owed back wages.

Auto layoffs in Mexico

Volkswagen is laying off workers from its Puebla plant, south of Mexico City. Since the beginning of the year, some 400 temporary workers have been laid off. Another 53 are to be laid off in the next few days, eliminating all temps from the plant. In addition, the jobs of 150 permanent workers are to be slashed.

Workers at the plant struck for 18 days last September before the Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITVW) climbed down on its wage demands, accepting a 14 percent increase, despite the fact that inflation has risen by 352 percent since 1994. Average wages are 226 pesos a day—about $26 US—about one seventh of what a US auto worker makes and one tenth the wage of a German VW worker.

After the settlement, VW-Mexico Vice President Francisco Bada announced that VW would stop a planned $1.5 billion investment in Mexico and would increase production in China, where VW officials said workers were "less assertive."

The VW union justified the layoff of the temporary workers on the grounds that the German company is going through hard times. A union spokesperson said that negotiations are taking place to minimize the number of permanent workers to be sacked.

Tentative agreements at four parts plants end strike

The United Auto Workers (UAW) ordered 700 workers at four plants owned by Johnson Controls, Inc. (JCI) to return to work after the company agreed to its first tentative agreement with the union. Workers at JCI plants in Shreveport, Louisiana; Earth City, Missouri; Northwood, Ohio; and Oklahoma City struck the company June 12 after it refused to honor majorities of workers who signed cards to obtain union recognition.

JCI, a Milwaukee-based company, makes instrument panels, seats and other interior components for the big automakers. A number of GM and DaimlerChrysler plants were forced to halt production because of the walkout.

According to the UAW, the company offered a $1,500 signing bonus, wage increases of $3 an hour and higher, company-paid health care, a 401(k) plan and company-paid life insurance for the workers, who earn half of what Big Three autoworkers are paid. The UAW pledged there would be no strikes at the plants during the life of the contract. Commenting on the settlement, UAW Vice President Bob King said, "We're looking forward to building a strong partnership with JCI."

The UAW has seen its membership cut by one-half over the last 30 years and its representation in independent parts plants decline from 50 percent in 1978 to 20 percent today. In exchange for the UAW's acquiescence to mass layoffs at the Big Three automakers—including 22,000 at Ford and 26,000 at DaimlerChrysler in the last few years—the companies have pressured their suppliers to accept deals with the UAW. In 1997 Ford informed JCI it would not use parts made by strikebreakers during a walkout at its Plymouth, Michigan and Oberlin, Ohio plants in order to get the company to negotiate a settlement with the union.

Las Vegas casinos hold out for health care concessions

Seven Las Vegas casinos have taken a hard line against the Culinary Workers Union as a July 1 contract expiration looms. Binion's Horseshoe, Four Queens, Fitzgeralds, Union Plaza, Las Vegas Club, El Cortez, the Western and the Castaways have all refused to settle on the same terms other gambling houses agreed to earlier this year.

The casinos claim they cannot afford to pay increased health care costs and are insisting on shifting union workers to a less expensive medical plan. The Culinary union is hoping to use AFL-CIO affiliates to pressure the recalcitrant gambling houses to accept a proposal close to the $3.24-an-hour increases in wages and benefits contained in contracts covering 38,000 workers negotiated last month.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy holds many of its conventions in Las Vegas. Both the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

© World Socialist Web Site

and the Communication Workers of America have conventions scheduled before the Culinary union's contracts expire and plan rallies. Meanwhile, the Culinary Workers are planning their own rally for June 21.

Contractor arrested for refusing to pay immigrant workers

The Attorney General of New York State ordered the arrest of a contractor for failing to pay immigrant workers a month's worth of wages. Richard Holowchak, a contractor who hires day laborers, did not pay four Central American workers $8,360 in wages.

When the contractor failed to make a June 3 court appearance, a warrant was issued for his arrest. Louis Alfredo Mejias, a 26-year-old worker from El Salvador, told *Newsday*, "He told me, 'I will pay you, I will pay you,' but he never did."

Union sues struck paper mill

The union representing 450 striking paper workers at Smart Papers plant in Hamilton, Ohio sued the company for not making payroll deductions for medical coverage on the last paycheck due workers. As a result of the company action, workers, who walked out on strike June 14, will be without medical coverage though the end of June.

The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) Local 5-1967 filed the suit in US District Court in Cincinnati and has asked that it be certified as a class action on behalf of all striking workers. The union also contends that the company has not allowed strikers to obtain federal COBRA insurance benefits, which it is obligated by law to provide.

Workers struck the company after more than one year of negotiations failed to result in a contract. PACE is asking for 3 percent in each year of a three-year contract. The company is offering 2 percent, 1.4 percent and 1.6 percent per year.

Council limits hours of interns

The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education announced it will set an 80-hour workweek standard for young doctors involved in training programs. The decision comes as a result of findings that doctors training as resident physicians are often putting in more than 100 hours a week, with some logging 36-hour periods with little or no sleep.

The fear is that these doctors are placing both themselves and their patients at risk. The concern is fueled by a recent study that found up to 98,000 hospital patients die each year because of medical errors.

But a spokesperson for the Committee of Interns and Residents, a union representing some 12,000 doctors, charged, "The new standards they are putting out are too weak." The standard allows shifts up to 24 hours, with provisions for a six-hour extension.

Congress is considering a bill that will impose federal rules on medical residents' work hours. The hospital industry is opposed to the any interference.

Stagehands strike St. Paul theater company

Twenty-five stagehands struck St. Paul's Ordway theatre as the performing company opened its performance of "Anything Goes" last week. The strikers, members of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees Local 113, are made up of electricians, carpenters, dressers and prop masters. They have been without a contract since February 20.

Union business agent Matt Rice charged that the theatre company was demanding concessions in order to recoup losses it incurred from investments in companies such as Enron. The Ordway has admitted it held Enron stock. The union has been negotiating to reduce the disparity in wages between the mostly male tradesmen and their lower-paid, mostly female, counterparts, who serve as wardrobe workers.

At the end of opening night's performance, management called on replacement workers to take a curtain call. Meanwhile, actors ad-libbed into the script words such as "stagehand," "scab" and "strike."

Las Vegas transit workers in month-long strike

Las Vegas city bus drivers are in the fourth week of a strike against the privately held transit company ATC, which contracts with the city to run the system. The strike has cut daily ridership from 150,000 to 75,000 and reduced revenues by $30,000 a day.

No new talks are scheduled as ATC has refused to sit down with Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1637, despite the fact that the union says it has a new offer to make. No details are available on issues separating the two sides.

Minnesota roofers strike ends

One thousand roofers from Minneapolis and St. Paul, members of Roofers Local 96, voted to accept a tentative agreement with the Twin City Roofing Contractor Association after a month and a half on the picket line. Neither side would reveal details of the new five-year agreement, except to say that the dispute over wages predominated along with health care issues.

Meanwhile, 2,500 members of two pipefitters locals have entered their sixth week on strike against the Minnesota Mechanical Contractors Association. Negotiators for the contractors claim there is movement in the talks and a tentative agreement will be concluded soon. Health care costs have proved to be the most difficult issue.

Safeway strike ends with mass layoff

A strike that began last October in Thunder Bay, Ontario has ended, with 481 employees facing the loss of their jobs after rejecting a final contract offer from the company. The mass layoff of workers at three Safeway food stores in the northern Ontario community was announced last Thursday, the day before an improved contract was presented to workers at three other northern Ontario outlets in Dryden, Fort Frances and Kenora. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) refused to hold a second vote demanded by the company in Thunder Bay, arguing that undue pressure was being exerted on workers to accept concessions. The union insisted a new vote would only be held if the Thunder Bay workers were offered the same contract as the one proposed at the outlying stores.

Canada Safeway, a Calgary-based company, is the largest grocery food chain in western Canada, with 210 stores. The company has said there was no end in sight to the strike and that it will seek a buyer for the closed stores. The union alleges that the company was never interested in achieving a fair contract.

Toronto commuter rail strike ends

A two-week-old strike by 134 workers at the Toronto commuter rail line—GO transit—ended when workers voted Friday to accept the latest contract offer. The workers are employed by Quebec-based Bombardier Transportation, which has the contract for the rail service in the Toronto area.

No details have yet been released in the settlement between the company and the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union (ATU), which represents the strikers. The union had been seeking an immediate wage increase of 11 percent and had previously rejected an offer of a 3 percent raise in each year of a three-year deal. The strike had a limited impact on commuter traffic because workers in other locals of the same union continued to work during the walkout. The head of GO has indicated he will pursue his efforts to have the government designate rail service workers as "essential" to prevent any future strike action.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site