

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 June 2002

## Massive rally for jobs in Argentina

Thousands of unemployed, teachers and public employees jammed the area around the Plaza de Mayo across from Argentina's Government House June 20, demanding jobs and unemployment benefits. Columns of demonstrators entered the plaza from several directions, disrupting downtown traffic.

The protest was organized by the Combative Class Current (CCC) and by the Argentine Workers Central (CTA). There was also a large column from the powerful Metalworkers Union (UOM), demanding jobs and wage increases for its members.

Recent statistics indicate that in the first five months of this year there were 11,000 protests against the government's economic policies, involving about 600,000 people.

## Santiago subway workers end 12-day strike

On June 22, Santiago Metro workers accepted a contract proposal and ended their 12-day walkout. The vote on the contract was 496 to 193. The substantial no vote (nearly 30 percent of the strikers) reflects concerns about the give-back provisions in the contract in return for one-time bonuses. The strike, by ticket sellers and mechanics, did not stop subway operations. On June 21 a train jumped the tracks. This was the first derailment in 30 years, and the Metro workers union blames it on lack of maintenance. Union leaders explained that, while it would have taken union personnel two hours to clear the track, it took scab workers about a day.

## Oil workers strike follows execution of Colombian union leader

Six thousand Colombian oil workers at the Barranca Bermeja and Cartagena refineries went on a two-day strike to protest the June 17 execution of Cesar Blanco Moreno, leader of the United Worker Syndicate (USO) by a right-wing paramilitary death squad.

Armed masked men intercepted Blanco Moreno near his home in the city of Bucaramanga. He was shot six times. Blanco Moreno, 38, was USO general secretary for the city of Bucaramanga.

The paramilitaries have admitted killing many USO leaders, including Aury Sara and Rafael Jaimes. National USO Secretary Javier Villanueva declared: "This is a state crime, in the hands of the paramilitaries, that is killing Colombian union leaders." News of the murder led the USO national directorate to meet in emergency session and organize the two-day strike that began June 18.

The execution coincided with a report presented by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to an International Labor Organization conference in Geneva, Switzerland. The report indicates that 90 percent of the 223 union leaders assassinated throughout the world last year were Colombian.

## Honduran teachers to strike

On June 22 the Honduran Federation of Teachers Organizations voted to call a national teachers strike in response to a government message cutting off face-to-face negotiations. The strike is set for June 26. The government's position is that it will not move from a contract proposal made on June 14. The teachers are seeking an hourly wage increase of 10.19 lempiras (about US\$0.63). Currently teachers receive 22.99 lempiras an hour (about \$1.40). The federation points out that current law has mandated a wage of 33.18 lempiras since last March.

While recognizing that by law the teachers should be paid the higher amount, the government insists there is no money to grant it.

## Uruguayan workers mobilize

On June 22 the Uruguayan Labor Federation (PIT-CUT) approved a plan to mobilize workers throughout Uruguay to protest President Batlle's economic policies.

The Argentine economic depression is being felt throughout Latin America, particularly in Uruguay, where last week the government had to step in and bail out a leading bank on the brink of bankruptcy. The government's decision to allow the peso to float resulted immediately in a steep depreciation of the national currency.

PIT-CUT economists fear that the government measure will result in a wave of inflation, cutting workers' spending power.

On June 27, in the context of the commemoration of workers' resistance to the military coup d'état of 1973, the unions will launch a series of rallies in Montevideo and other Uruguayan cities. June 27, 1973 marked the beginning of Uruguay's dirty war of repression against the working class. On that day, the National Labor Confederation (CNT) launched a general strike lasting two weeks against the fascist generals.

On June 28 there will be a partial strike of public employees with a rally in downtown Montevideo. The PIT-CUT is leaving it up to its member unions how they will participate in that event.

## Workers strike private bus lines in New York

For the third time this year, workers for three private bus companies in New York City's borough of Queens have walked off their jobs. They have been on strike since June 18, with no immediate settlement in sight. The immediate cause of the walkout is the city's renegeing on an agreement to support a 19 percent funding increase of the workers' health benefits over a two-year period.

Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents the workers, has stated that the city is now offering only a 3.5 percent increase over two years. The workers are concerned that with the skyrocketing medical costs, their health benefits will shortly go bankrupt.

The 1,500 workers, consisting of drivers, mechanics, dispatchers and cleaners, had been working without a contract for 18 months and have not had a pay raise in 30 months. The three companies—Jamaica Buses, Triboro Coach and Queens Surface Corporation—normally service 116,000 commuters. Many riders, although inconvenienced by the walkout, have expressed support for the strikers. The workers had already engaged in a one-day wildcat strike in early January and a two-day strike in late February.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has said that the city will not offer any more money to the workers. He also declared, "We are not going to get involved in a private dispute between the bus companies and their people."

However, the three companies operate as franchises with two-year contracts from the city and are heavily subsidized by the state and the city. The city owns some of the buses and other property used by the companies. City Hall determines what lines they can use, establishes the fares, and determines how much profit the companies can make. It is for this reason that the city's commissioner of labor relations has frequently attended the contract talks.

The major demand of the workers in two previous strikes was for job security. They no longer wanted to have their livelihoods dependent upon whether or not the private lines they work for win the city franchises. The union has not publicly raised this issue in the current strike.

#### **Las Vegas transit workers reject contract, denounce union leader**

Striking Las Vegas city bus drivers rejected a tentative agreement by a 353 to 41 vote and accused the president of their union of trying to sell out their strike. Members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1637 are in their fifth week of a strike against the city and the private management company ATC Vancom.

Workers, who are paid between \$9.50 and \$14 an hour, struck to raise their wages to the \$18- and \$19-an-hour range and seek a higher contribution by management towards health insurance premiums. Workers soundly rejected the tentative agreement that called for a \$3.50 an hour raise. What especially angered workers is union President Frank Opdyke's endorsement of the inferior contract, which contained terms under which drivers charged with various misdemeanors would not be allowed to return to their jobs.

"This is the type of company that would make us beg and grovel to get back in, and then they would get rid of us as quick as they can," striker David Sauzo told the *Las Vegas Sun*. Striker Tom Hunt told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, "We're all pissed he [Opdyke] is endorsing it. He knows this is not what we want."

Meanwhile, ATC Vancom has mounted a sustained operation to replace striking drivers and has declared that at some point they will set a deadline for workers to end their strike. Those who do not honor it will lose their seniority and have their pay reset at starting wages. The AFL-CIO has done nothing to support the drivers. Instead it has threatened to campaign against a \$2.7 billion tax initiative for road construction and mass transit on the November ballot.

Other issues in the contract that rankled workers were the length of the contract and the lack of retroactive pay. The old agreement expired at the end of 2001.

#### **Split among Las Vegas casino owners as contract deadline looms**

Negotiators for the Culinary Workers Union reached a deal with another Las Vegas casino, leaving nine gambling houses yet to come to terms before a July 1 strike deadline. According to union officials, the Barbary Coast, one of the so-called strip casinos, settled a five-year contract that provides a \$3.24 increase in wages and benefits that is supposed to mirror the contract settled last June with the bulk of the gaming houses. Now only two other strip casinos remain without contracts, the Stardust and Sahara, and these are expected to settle this week.

Seven gambling houses in downtown Las Vegas, claiming they are not as profitable as the strip casinos, have been holding out for contract terms that will move workers off the union medical plan and into the less costly company health insurance. But one of the seven, Fitzgeralds, broke away from the group and is considering terms closer to the strip casinos.

#### **Flight attendants union rejects United Airlines concessions package**

Officials for the Association of Flight Attendants told United Airlines that they would not agree to a concessions contract amounting to \$90 million in give-backs. The union says it will oppose the cuts unless the company addresses its concerns over United's plans for its subsidiary Avolar, which the company has abandoned at this point. The union also claims that the flight attendants make disproportionately lower salaries at United compared to the pilots and mechanics.

The company is seeking concessions in order to obtain federally backed loans. It faces a June 28 deadline set by Congress.

On June 20, the Air Line Pilots Association agreed to a 10 percent pay cut by pilots to help bail out the airline and also agreed to the airline's plan to increase the number of low-cost regional jets. The total savings from pilot concessions is said to amount to \$520 million over three years.

#### **Threat of confrontation over jobs on West Coast ports**

The demand by shipping companies to implement new technology that would eliminate hundreds of jobs at West Coast ports could spark work actions by the 10,500 members of the International Longshoremen's and Warehouse Union (ILWU) starting July 1.

Equipment and computerization would eliminate jobs and increase productivity at ports from San Diego to Seattle and put more than \$1 billion into the pockets of the owners. Management also is using the threat of terrorism to justify the new technology as a security issue.

ILWU officials are publicly playing down the possibility of a rupture with management, declaring they are confident of obtaining a contract. The union insists it will not call a strike. But many sectors of industry fear workers will stage a crippling slowdown with a debilitating effect on the economy. Corporations have encouraged President Bush to intervene in the event of a work stoppage and declare a cooling-off period.

#### **Group in New York charged with forced labor**

A United States Attorney unsealed an indictment July 19 charging six people with forced labor for holding 40 Mexican immigrant workers as virtual slaves and using threats of physical reprisals if they tried to escape. The six individuals run migrant labor camps east of Buffalo, New York and were insisting workers pay off more than \$1,000 in debts incurred for food, transportation, rent and electricity.

The workers were brought to New York from Arizona under barbaric conditions last summer. As many as 30 workers were packed into vans with no seats and windows that would not open, enduring unbearable temperatures. Upon arriving at Albion, New York, they were billeted in a farmhouse with up to 11 workers sharing three beds cramped into one bedroom.

One worker told the *New York Times*, "They threatened us that if we didn't work harder they would lock us in a small truck for a month without feeding us." Workers were promised as much as \$500 a week in one case. The defendants have pleaded not guilty to the charges.

#### **Navistar tries to employ scabs at Chatham truck plant**

At Navistar International Corp.'s Chatham heavy truck plant, the company is attempting to employ scabs to replace the 800 workers who have been on strike since June 1. The Chatham workers voted 98 percent in favor of a strike after the company demanded a sharp reduction in wages and benefits as part of its campaign to cut \$28 million in costs at the plant.

A Navistar news release claimed that the Ontario Tories' 1995 Labour Relations and Employment Statute Law Amendment Act permitted the use of replacement workers. Nevertheless, the scabs were turned away by the police in anticipation of a violent confrontation. The Canadian Auto Workers have organized mass pickets and threatened to bus in members from across the province to prevent the scabs from entering.

In addition to the attempt to use scabs, the company has increased production at its Escobedo, Mexico plant. It has also threatened to close the Chatham plant if its cost-cutting goals are not achieved.

#### **City of Toronto employees likely to strike**

A number of groups of Toronto municipal employees are preparing to strike in the coming weeks. Outside workers numbering 6,800—in water, waste, sanitation, paramedics, parks and recreation, roads and transportation departments—could be on strike by Monday, June 24. Their major demand is for job security. The city council has been threatening to contract out many of the services provided by the outside workers. The Toronto Civic Employees Union, Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), represents the workers. Union officials have claimed that the city is not even attempting to negotiate with them.

Fifteen thousand "inside" workers—principally clerical staff and public health nurses—could be on strike by the following Saturday. CUPE Local 79 represents the inside workers. Again, job security, in the face of the city's intent to privatize services, is their main demand.

Ann Dembinski, president of CUPE Local 79, commented: "Most of our

councilors have jumped on the privatization bandwagon, they're just not willing to admit it.... City Council is avoiding the public's reservations about contracting out and privatization. People are very concerned about the threat to public safety and privacy. Haven't city councilors learned anything from the recent water scandals?"

Twenty-four hundred city library workers (also members of CUPE Local 416) are in the midst of a strike vote. Toronto firefighters were also involved in a recent job action, responding only to emergency calls.

#### **Lafarge cement workers strike ends**

A six-month strike by 65 employees of multinational cement manufacturer Lafarge in Bath, Ontario was concluded on June 15. The workers, represented by Local 219-O of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), voted 77 percent in favor of the settlement and will return to work July 2.

The principal grievance of the workers was the excessive amount of overtime required at the plant. Many workers were performing 300-400 hours of overtime a year and many were on call 24 hours a day. According to union statements, this has been resolved by the adoption of a "voluntary" system. The settlement also includes an agreement by the company to hire 17 percent more staff, despite the fact that the initial demand had been for 20 more employees at the plant. The various union statements are silent on the wage component of the settlement.

The company employed scabs during the strike, as well as the services of a private security firm.



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