

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 July 2002

## 11,000 protests in Argentina

There were over 11,000 demonstrations in Argentina in the first five months of 2002, according to statistics released June 28 by the Secretary of Interior Security. In addition to rallies, mobilizations and marches, the acts of protest have included hunger strikes and the barricading of highways. Forty-four percent of the protests were concentrated in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

## Brazilian bus drivers launch warning strike

Bus drivers and fare collectors in the city of Recife, Brazil carried out a warning strike on the afternoon of June 27. The transit workers are demanding an 18 percent wage increase. Bus drivers earn a monthly wage of about \$244. Fare collectors earn about \$120. Though partial, the strike had a serious impact on the city's traffic. The transit workers union has declared that, barring a contract resolution, it will call an indefinite transit strike.

## Brazilian customs employees strike

A strike by 20,000 customs employees shut down nearly 80 percent of the border crossings in Brazil's interiors. Protests first began in April and then intensified this month with slowdowns that delayed the movement of merchandise.

## Worker killed in Peruvian lumber workers strike

A worker was shot and killed by police June 26 during a protest by striking lumber workers in the Department of Madre de Dios, located in the southeastern Peruvian jungle on the border between Brazil and Bolivia. Several other workers were wounded in the confrontation.

William Santos Tuesta was shot by a police agent trying to stop a protest march in Puerto Maldonado, capital of Madre de Dios. After the shooting furious workers set fire to wood deposits in Puerto Maldonado. The main demand of the strike, which began June 19, is to end the privatization of native forests.

## No agreement in West Coast dock workers negotiations

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) remain far apart as a July 1 contract expiration draws near

for 10,500 West Coast dock workers.

Going into talks, the PMA and its corporate supporters made a great deal about obtaining contract changes that would allow the implementation of new technologies resulting in savings of \$1 billion. Management's demands include slashing benefits, freezing wages for three years and introducing new language that would gut arbitration. The ILWU is also charging that some of the technological upgrades proposed by the PMA would facilitate the transfer of work from the ILWU to nonunion contractors.

The PMA is also seeking to exploit the September 11 events to advance its agenda. Kees Marges, secretary of the Dockers' Section of the International Transport Workers Federation, has been attending the contract negotiations as an observer. He reported that "the PMA appears to be trying to use the events of September 11 and the need to improve port security as a way to force the ILWU to accept the unacceptable. US labor relations have changed dramatically since 9/11 ... security is being used to shift the balance of power dramatically in favor of the shipping lines and shippers," he said.

## Las Vegas transit strikers accept tentative agreement

Las Vegas transit workers voted July 27 to accept an agreement after management agreed to a clause that requires the rehiring of all 500 striking workers. In a 264-117 vote, workers ratified a \$3.50 wage increase over four years and a cap on workers' contributions to health care at 15 percent. The contract also includes a \$200 bonus to drivers who agree to return to work by July 1 and begin health insurance payments.

Workers had already voted down two previous contracts by margins greater than 90 percent. In the previous agreement the company offered a \$3.50-an-hour wage increase, but distributed over a five-year period. The company had also threatened to replace drivers who did not surrender and report to work when ordered by the company. Under the new agreement the company has agreed to allow all strikers to return to work while the union refrains from fining union members who crossed the picket line.

Despite the agreement, transit workers are bitter about the month-long strike and the failure of the Amalgamated Transit Union to press their issues. Union President Frank Opydke was denounced by strikers for endorsing the previous tentative agreement that left the door open to the victimization of workers by management. For many drivers the \$3.50 wage increase is insufficient given the \$9-14-an-hour wage scale.

### **Cap makers vote to end strike**

Workers at the New Era Cap plant in Buffalo, New York, which manufactures caps for major league baseball teams, voted June 27 to end their year-long strike and accept a new contract. No details were available about the new four-year agreement that passed by a 125-36 margin.

According to reports, strikers had rejected the same contract three days earlier after it was submitted by the leadership of the Communication Workers of America Local 14177. About 220 workers first walked off the job on July 16, 2001 after the company ordered new production quotas that would have had the effect of cutting \$3 from workers' average hourly earnings of \$12. Another 80 workers declined to walk out. New Era has another cap manufacturing facility in Buffalo along with two plants in Alabama.

### **Injury rates twice industry average at Ohio Honda plants**

The United Auto Workers (UAW) revealed statistics that show the injury rate at Honda plants in Ohio are double the auto industry average. Based on federal safety logs, the union charges that during the year 2000, there were 23.5 injuries that caused lost workdays for every 100 workers at two auto assembly plants. This represented more than double the industry average of 10.5 injuries per 100 workers.

The UAW, which hopes to organize all four of Honda's Ohio plants, charges that the injury rate is a product of Honda's demand for high production, the widespread use of untrained temporary workers, and the absence of an independent safety advocate for the workers.

The 2000 injury tally is not the highest for Honda. The company had even higher injury rates in 1998 and 1999. Those rates led to an investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health administration of the company's Marysville, Ohio plant, which found 40 serious safety violations and resulted in \$100,000 in fines.

### **Boeing-Machinist contract talks begin**

Contract talks between the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the aerospace giant Boeing began June 26. Some 26,000 IAM members are covered by the

three-year agreement that involves plants in Washington State, Oregon and Kansas.

Boeing, driven by worldwide competition, has continually striven to reduce labor costs through attacks on benefits, containment of wages and job reductions. In 2000 this provoked the first-ever strike by the company's 20,000-member engineering union. It is expected that economic issues will not come to the fore during the present negotiations until August. The current labor agreement with the IAM expires September 2.

### **Union moves to avert Las Vegas casino strike**

The Culinary Workers Union reached tentative agreements Monday with all but two downtown Las Vegas hotel-casinos, averting a strike that could have been the largest in Nevada in two decades. No details have been released about the deals, which will be voted on this week.

Informational pickets went up briefly at the El Cortez, Las Vegas Club, Horseshoe, Castaways, Golden Gate and Western casinos, but negotiators kept talking past a midnight July 1 deadline without calling a threatened strike by some 5,000 maids, food service workers and bartenders. Talks are continuing at two other hotels, including the Golden Gate hotel-casino, the oldest in the city.

A strike would have been the biggest in Nevada since 17,000 Culinary Workers Union members walked out in Las Vegas 17 years ago. Casinos had said they intended to hire 4,625 nonunion workers if a strike were called.



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