

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 October 2002

## **Jobless protest in Argentina**

About 300 jobless workers marched October 4 on the Labor Ministry in Buenos Aires demanding unemployment subsidies for 10,000 unemployed workers and an end to repression in Jujuy Province. On September 20 over 130 workers were arrested at a similar protest in Jujuy. Most of those who were jailed have still not been released.

A group of masked protesters armed with wooden batons blocked the streets along the march. "If we uncover our faces and the police identify us, they look us up later in the neighborhood and we are victimized," said one of the masked men. The workers also criticized the form in which the government pays unemployment subsidies. Workers are issued 150 Lecops—a federal bond that is not exchangeable everywhere. Furthermore, many eligible workers do not even receive these subsidies and workers without children are not eligible at all.

In Formosa province on October 3 100 unemployed workers blocked a national highway that links Argentina with Paraguay. The protesters also demanded unemployment subsidies. The demonstration blocked traffic for about a day, causing long delays to and from Paraguay.

## **Teachers in Dominican Republic threaten strike**

On October 1, the Dominican Professors Association (ADP) announced that the Department of Education had broken last year's wage agreement and that it would mobilize the nation's teachers in response.

Teachers who had been promised monthly wages of US\$200 and up are only getting \$180. Many teachers have also had their wages cut. In addition, the department has been arbitrarily "retiring" young and healthy teachers without their consent, has suspended and transferred school principals and dropped teachers that in some cases are owed years of back pay.

## **Salvadoran doctors and health workers strike public hospitals**

On September 29 Salvadoran health workers and doctors walked out of the Oncological hospital and turned it over to the government, leaving a handful of health workers to provide emergency services. Its workers had occupied the hospital for 11 days. Since then the doctors and health workers strike has extended to other hospitals in San Salvador. The strikers are demanding the government drop plans to privatize the Social Security System.

The government denies that privatization is planned, insisting that the health services are being "modernized" and made more efficient, although it appears the plans include handing over health care to insurance companies. Doctors denounced the measure, saying that in effect "those that do not pay will be left to die."

The government is threatening to arrest union leaders and make the strikers responsible for any costs or damages resulting from the strike. Meanwhile it announced that it would mobilize army doctors and contract with private hospitals to provide health services. Undeterred, health professionals declared the shutting down of hospitals will continue, beyond San Salvador, to the nation's regional public hospitals.

## **Health professionals also strike in Guatemala**

Public health workers employed by Guatemala's Social Security Institute (IGSS) went on strike September 26, paralyzing outpatient services. The strike was called to protest the arbitrary dismissal of union members, for an end to the shortage of hospital supplies and for a wage increase.

## **Boston janitors strike continues as one group of contractors settle**

One major cleaning contractor broke ranks with 30 other companies at the end of last week and signed an interim agreement with the union representing striking Boston janitors. The company, One Source, employs 1,700 of the 10,700 members of Service Employees International Union who clean office buildings in the Boston area and are on strike for higher wages and health care benefits for part-time workers.

Boston part-time janitors earn \$9.95 an hour while full-time workers make \$10.20 an hour. This compares with wages of \$17 an hour in New York, \$15 in San Francisco and \$12.50 in Chicago.

Equally important, however, is the issue of health care. Less than 25 percent of the unionized janitors work full time and therefore receive no health benefits. The agreement with One Source, along with a handful of smaller companies that also agreed to settle, provides health care benefits after working 27.5 hours a week starting in 2005. It also provides for three sick days.

Leading the opposition to the janitors strike is Unicco, the largest of the cleaning contractors, which employs 5,500 workers at 93 office locations. Lead negotiator James Canavan, a Unicco executive, declared, "If we were to give comprehensive medical benefits to part-time employees, the cost would be prohibitive."

## **Government threats stop Oakland airport screeners protest**

Private screeners at Oakland International Airport in California called off a short work stoppage October 4 to protest discriminatory layoffs after the federal Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the agency they work for threatened to fire them and bring in screeners from airports in Sacramento, California and Reno, Nevada.

Screeners planned to walk off the job for 10 minutes at the start of the Friday morning shift. Management threatened to have replacements in place within an hour. Workers were also told they

would lose unemployment benefits, including a special TSA bonus awarded to those who remain on the job until federal employees take over.

According to Fred Lau, Oakland International's federal security director, participation in a walkout would also "have an impact on their applications and their future eligibility for employment" with the TSA.

The planned walkout was a response to the TSA's elimination of workers from the new federal group because they are foreigners. About 100 of Oakland's 240 screeners were slated to be laid off at the beginning of this week because they do not qualify under the TSA's new post-September 11 rules. Among them is a law passed by Congress last fall which bars all non-citizens from working as screeners in the new federal workforce. About half of Oakland's screeners fall into this category.

#### **Workers strike New Jersey hospital equipment maker**

Seventy workers struck a Lodi, New Jersey hospital equipment manufacturer October 1 after company management and negotiators for Sheet Metal Local 25 failed to reach a contract agreement. The main issue is Blickman Health Industries' demand to increase workers' health insurance co-payment by 70 percent. The union asked for a 5.25 percent wage increase for each year of a three-year agreement and to limit insurance co-payments to 35 percent of total premium costs for families and 15 percent for single employees. Blickman offered wage increases of 3.5 percent, 4 percent and 4.5 percent in each year of the contract.

The New Jersey Housing and Community Development Network recently released a study showing that residents of the county where the factory is situated must earn \$20.96 per hour in order to afford an average two-bedroom apartment costing \$1,090 per month. Blickman workers average \$13.38 per hour and are paying an average 43 percent of their wages for housing.

#### **International Falls teachers strike continues**

Some 100 teachers in International Falls, Minnesota concluded their second week on strike to demand higher wages and oppose increased insurance costs. The strike has shut down three public schools, affecting 1,500 students.

After more than one year without a contract the school board has offered a mere 1 percent salary increase in the first year and a 4 percent increase in the second and final year of the contract. Members of Education Minnesota Local 331 want 3.5 percent and 3 percent respectively.

In the last contract, the school district covered all costs for basic health care coverage. But it is now seeking to transfer 10 percent of those costs to teachers. Many teachers point out that the insurance increases mean they will actually be making less money than in previous years. The union maintains that the wage increases are in line with other settlements in northern Minnesota.

International Falls teachers last struck in 1992 for 18 days. That strike coincided with the long and bitter wildcat strike by building trades workers at International Falls Boise Cascade paper mill.

#### **Vidéotron strikers march to Quebec City**

Twenty-three striking Vidéotron technicians are marching from Montreal to Quebec City in order to deliver a petition to the National Assembly. They expect to reach Quebec City on October 15. The petition, with 65,000 signatures attached, demands that the

Quebec government intervene in the labor conflict, which has seen 2,200 workers on strike/lockout since May 8.

Vidéotron, a cable and Internet provider, was taken over two years ago by media and publishing giant Quebecor—with the assistance of Quebec's *Caisse de dépôt et de placement* (the Quebec Pension Fund) and the support of the Parti Québécois (PQ) government. Quebecor has sought to impose major concessions on the workers—to the tune of \$50 million in cuts to wages and benefits, as well as the elimination of almost 1,000 jobs.

The Quebec state, for its part, has already intervened in the conflict. The courts were only too happy to provide injunctions limiting the number of picketers. Early in the conflict, the Premier and Parti Québécois (PQ) leader, Bernard Landry, sang the praises of Quebecor CEO and principal shareholder Pierre-Karl Péladeau, calling him "a good corporate citizen."

#### **Settlement reached in strike of New Brunswick civil servants**

On October 3, 1,265 New Brunswick civil servants voted 80 percent in favor of ratifying a settlement with the provincial government. The settlement provides a pay raise of 12.5 percent over four years. The workers had been demanding 14 percent over four years. The settlement includes an additional increase for child protection workers, along with a commitment to hire more child protection staff.

The workers, who include social workers, probation officers and family court mediators, are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1418, and had been without a contract for two years.

#### **Nova Scotia teachers indicate willingness to strike**

Ten-thousand Nova Scotia teachers could be on strike as soon as November 12. The teachers, who have been without a contract since December, are demanding a 12.7 percent raise over three years. The Tory provincial government's Ministry of Education is offering only 8 percent over four years. The Tories are also seeking to force teachers to spend an extra 40 minutes a day supervising students.

An October 3 strike vote returned an overwhelming strike mandate. The teachers' union, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NTSU), will meet with provincially appointed mediator Milton Veniot and the Ministry of Education again during the coming week.



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