

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 October 2002

## **Social security workers occupy headquarters in Argentina**

Employees at the National Institute for Social Services for Pensioners (PAMI), Latin America's largest social security agency, occupied the agency's headquarters October 16, demanding that the government overturn the 13 percent wage cut imposed last year on all public employees. Workers have been conducting surprise strikes since the previous week.

The occupation has continued despite the government's effort to turn retirees against the protesting workers. The 13 percent cut, imposed by the de la Rúa government in July 2001 on public sector workers as well as pension recipients, was declared unconstitutional last month, but the Duhalde government has yet to begin paying it back.

## **Chilean health workers strike**

On October 15 and 16 public health workers and doctors walked out in Chile over draft medical legislation, the AUGE plan, which opponents see as a major step toward the privatization of health care. The AUGE plan authorizes the government to subcontract private companies to provide care for 56 medical conditions.

The health workers and doctors are members of the Confederation of Health Workers (CONFENATS). In Santiago the strike shut down 14 public hospitals. Workers also held rallies and marches in front of the Ministry of Health building.

In response to government efforts to victimize some of the strikers, health workers took over the Sotero del Rio Hospital in Santiago. Police removed the workers a few hours later.

## **Guatemalan doctors strike ends**

After three weeks of demonstrations and strikes against the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security, doctors voted to return to their jobs after an arbitration court issued a back-to-work order. The court also ordered a 20 percent pay increase for the doctors, who were demanding a 30 percent hike. The court also ordered authorities to rehire 600 doctors who had been fired for striking.

This was the second doctors' strike in Guatemala in the last three months. In August thousands of public doctors struck for eleven days.

## **Montevideo city workers threaten to strike**

Municipal workers in Montevideo, Uruguay, voted to give the city government until this Thursday to improve on a wage offer or face a walkout. If an agreement is not reached the workers are prepared to strike for an indefinite duration. The municipal workers are demanding that serious negotiations take place and that their wages be fully indexed to the rate of inflation.

## **Boston janitors continue strike**

Boston-area janitors are in their third week on strike against cleaning contractors who are resisting the workers' demands for improved health benefits and an increase in full-time job

opportunities. Last week Service Employees International Local 254 added four downtown buildings to the strike, including the J. Joseph Moakley Courthouse and 18 Tremont St., where Unicco Service Co., the area's biggest cleaning contractor, has its headquarters. The action brought to 97 the number of buildings downtown and in the suburbs where the union says more than 2,000 workers are striking. Hundreds of janitors joined the union's nightly march last night, banging drums from Copley Square in Boston to Kendall Square in Cambridge.

Unicco has stated it would have to lay off thousands of workers to meet the union's demand to move part-time janitors, who earn less than \$10 an hour and have no health coverage, into buildings where they can accumulate 27.5 hours a week and qualify for health benefits. Most janitors now work part time, without health benefits. The transition to full-time work was the heart of a proposal signed by nine cleaning companies and the union, but Unicco and other major contractors oppose a settlement based on that agreement. The firms have refused to acknowledge the agreements and called the janitors' vote to approve the interim deals "beyond silly."

## **Navistar provoking lock out at truck plants**

Navistar, the parent company of International Truck and Engine Corporation, said it would allow its contract with the United Auto Workers to expire at midnight Monday, which could lead to a lockout or strike affecting more than 7,000 workers. The agreement, which covers workers at plants in the Chicago area; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Springfield, Ohio; Atlanta, Dallas and Baltimore, was due to expire October 1. Although workers were ready to walk out, UAW International officers stepped in to negotiate an indefinite contract extension. Navistar cancelled the extension Sunday.

"We regret that despite three months of intensive negotiations, including a three-week extension and involvement at the highest levels of both organizations, we still have not been able to reach an agreement to help build short-and long-term strength for the business," Dan Ustian, Navistar president and chief operating officer, said in statement. Management is seeking sweeping demands for increased workloads, wage and benefit concessions and other givebacks. Last summer the company, which produces mid-range diesel engines, medium trucks, heavy trucks and severe service vehicles, waged a bitter union-busting campaign against workers at its Canadian plant in Chatham, Ontario. Last week Navistar announced it was shutting the Chatham plant, eliminating the jobs of 1,000 workers. (See item below).

## **Lockout at Peterbilt truck continues**

Peterbilt Motors Co. rejected a union offer to return to work, saying it wants a vote on a concessions contract to make its

operations more “competitive” before it will end a lockout of 750 workers at its truck plant near Nashville, Tennessee. The Madison facility is the only union plant the company operates. It is continuing to build trucks at its plant in Denton, Texas, during the lockout.

The lockout, which began on September 3, affects members of United Auto Workers Local 1832. The company’s demands include a 300 percent increase in worker-paid health care costs, a 600 percent increase in prescription drug costs, a de facto wage cut and a pension offer that also lagged behind inflation. David Hovind, the president of PACCAR, the company that owns Peterbilt, and other top executives got \$2.4 million in executive pay raises last year.

#### **Strike threat at General Electric plant**

International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) Local 201 notified management last week that the 2,500-member local in Lynn, Massachusetts will strike if the company does not address union concerns about farming out jobs to lower-cost operations overseas. General Electric Aircraft Engines, based in Evendale, Ohio, said it will cut 1,000 jobs by the end of this year, and potentially 1,200 to 1,800 more over the next two years, because of a slumping global airline industry. Forty jobs in Lynn are expected to be cut in January and sent to a plant in Romania.

Meanwhile IUE officials throughout the country are discussing whether to call a strike on January 1, 2003, when the company unilaterally imposes increases in health care costs for current employees and retirees.

The IUE and AFL-CIO bureaucracy have attempted to divert anger over downsizing by promoting nationalism and denouncing the company as unpatriotic. Visiting Lynn last week, Richard Trumka, secretary/treasurer of the national AFL-CIO, denounced GE’s practice of shipping government defense contracts to overseas producers. “We need government policy that reverses this trend of farming out work. It is in the best, long-term interest of our national security that we do not [teach manufacturing methods] to foreign contractors,” he said.

#### **Strike ends at Winnipeg Free Press**

Twelve hundred workers at the *Winnipeg Free Press*, who have been on strike since October 9, returned to work on October 18. The workers include reporters, editors, photographers and carriers. Sixty of the workers are represented by the Graphic Communications International Union, while the rest are represented by the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union.

The main issue was a company demand for the introduction of a new two-tiered wage system, which would pay new and part-time employees significantly less. When the contract expired on September 30, the workers voted 96 percent in favor of strike action. In the final settlement the company’s demand for a 1/3 cut in starting salaries was dropped, and the workers were offered a wage increase of 6.25% over three years.

#### **Chatham truck plant to be closed**

International Truck and Engine has announced that the Navistar heavy truck plant in Chatham, Ontario will be closed by early next summer. One thousand workers will lose their jobs, not counting 1,200 workers who are already on indefinite layoff.

The plant was the site of a tense six-week strike this summer. The company demanded \$28 million in concessions by workers and attempted to employ scabs and strikebreaking thugs during the course of the conflict. Six workers were injured, one of whom went into a coma, after a guard from a private security corporation drove a van into a picket line.

The settlement that ended the strike included an increase in the number of trucks produced per day, as well as provisions for mandatory overtime. The leadership of the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) called the settlement a “victory,” because it guaranteed that the plant would not be closed down before June 1, 2003. In effect, the CAW has directly presided over the closure of this plant.

The production that went on at the Chatham plant will be resumed in Escobedo, Mexico. CAW president Buzz Hargrove denounced the move in the following terms: “It’s a slap in the face to say that we’re going to transfer work out of Canada, into Mexico, into slave labour conditions and ship it back to Canada.” This hypocrisy comes from a leader who has consistently urged the auto industry to shut plants in the US instead of Canada because of the savings the auto bosses can achieve through lower labor and health care costs in Canada.

#### **Saskatchewan Health Care Workers Settle**

A month-long strike by 2,500 Saskatchewan health care workers has come to an end after a settlement was reached with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations, representing the province’s New Democratic Party government. At one point during the strike, the NDP Premier, Lorne Calvert, went so far as to suggest that such strikes might be banned in the future.

The union, which represents pharmacists, paramedics, social workers, and therapists, among others, settled for a wage increase of 21.8% over three years, along with promises by SAHO to address scheduling and recruiting issues that lead to massive amounts of overwork. The strikers returned to work on October 17.

During the conflict, union officials worked to delay job action by the health care workers—yet the strike quickly widened to encompass the full complement of 2500 workers. Meanwhile, on October 12, 80 ambulance workers in the Saskatoon Health Region entered into legal strike position and seeking to negotiate with the province. Their major demand is for wage parity with ambulance workers in Regina.



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