Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 November 2002

Five thousand metal workers protest in Sao Paul

Sao Paulo metal workers, members of Forca Sindical (FS), went on strike November 1. About 5,000 metal workers blocked major streets in downtown Sao Paulo for three hours demanding a 15 percent wage increase. The workers are threatening to strike again November 11 and stay out until their demands are met.

The employers are only offering 7.5 percent. According to an industry syndicate (SIANFESTP) spokesman, the industry is undergoing dire economic circumstances and is unable to offer more money. There are 70 metal foundries in greater Sao Paulo, employing more than 50,000 workers.

Argentine unemployed protest jailing of two of their comrades

On November 1, supporters of the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD) rallied and marched in Buenos Aires demanding freedom for two of its members. The workers demanded an end to what they call "the criminalization of social protest" and an acceleration of intimidation, threats and persecution of militant workers.

The unemployed rallied in front of the court buildings demanding that charges against Carlos Bertola and Deigo Quinteros be dropped and that the repressive measures against the unemployed cease. The MTD points out that so far this year three youths have been assassinated during social protests. Others have been wounded and scores have been beaten and kidnapped.

Quinteros and Bertola were arrested last year in the wake of a bombing. They were charged with possession of weapons. The district attorney is recommending a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence, unusually harsh by Argentine standards.

The march occurred as part of a day of protest to denounce the increasing criminalization of social protest under the Duhalde administration.

In the city of Centerario, in the Patagonian oil-producing province of Neuquen, unemployed workers demanding jobs took over city hall on October 31. They are holding the mayor and three councilmen hostage.

The occupation took place peacefully and with the support of the population, which despite heavy police presence took to the streets protesting corrupt practices in the way that aid to the unemployed is being administered.

Costa Rican dockworkers threaten strike

Costa Rican Caribbean Coast dockworkers have threatened to strike November 5 if they are not paid back wages and benefits. The workers are employed by the Atlantic rim port and development agency (JAPDEVA).

JAPDEVA management is urging the Costa Rican legislature to pass an emergency appropriation of $2.5 million to avoid a costly work stoppage.

Peruvian professors and students demand more money for universities

The Peruvian Student Federation (FEP) announced that thousands of students, professors, university workers and faculty deans will march November 5 on the National Congress in Lima to demand more money for universities.

The demonstrators want the legislature increase to its appropriation to the university by $28 million, up from the current $75 million.

Municipal strike continues in Montevideo

The strike of municipal workers in Montevideo, Uruguay is now in its third week. Workers assemble every day in front of Montevideo's City Hall to block the entrance of scabs and contract labor. The municipal administration of Mayor Mariano Arana (of the left-wing "Broad Front") now argues that the wage agreement signed at the beginning of 2002 was too generous and unrealistic. It insists that the city has no money, due to the Uruguayan economic crisis, and is trying to negotiate an alternative contract.

At a general membership meeting of the Association of Municipal Workers (ADEOM), workers chased out union officials trying to present the new management proposal. A new meeting has been scheduled for November 5.

Boston janitors criticize settlement

Boston janitors have begun to voice opposition to the recent tentative agreement that brought their three-month strike to a close, charging the settlement falls short of what they should have gotten.

Workers say they expected to receive five sick days instead of the two that were negotiated. Only 1,000 of the janitors will receive medical coverage, adding to the 1,900 who previously had health care. But this still leaves 8,000 without medical care. Further, many workers believe the 30 percent wage increase, which will bring wages to around $13 an hour, is insufficient, especially when compared to the $17 an hour received by New York janitors.

"There just aren't enough benefits after striking for so long," Manuel Hernandez told the *Boston Globe*. "The majority of janitors don't agree with the settlement—we fought for more than they gave us," said Carlos Melera. Janitors will vote on the contract this week.

Massachusetts aircraft workers launch protest strike against GE

Workers at General Electric's aircraft engine plant in Lynn, Massachusetts launched a four-day strike beginning October 31 to protest the company's export of jobs and plans to increase workers' portion of health care costs.

About 2,550 of the plant's 4,400 workers are members of the International Union of Electrical Workers—Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA). GE plans to cut 100 jobs from the plant by next year. Overall, GE plans to cut 2,800 of the company's 26,000 employees nationwide.

The union and company have been in negotiations for three weeks, during which time the company has announced that it will raise workers' co-payments for health care starting in January 2003. IUE-CWA and GE have clashed over the results of a $1.9 billion Navy contract awarded to the company. While 58 percent of that contract's work was supposed to be done at the Lynn plant, GE later said the figure was incorrect and that only 18 percent would be done there. The union charges that this will result in the loss of 1,000 jobs.

Workers injured in Ohio steel mill explosion

Ten workers were injured in a blast furnace explosion at a Republic Engineered Products steel mill in Lorain, Ohio during the first day of a weeklong repair project. One worker suffered a severe head injury and was listed in critical condition while another had his shoulder separated.

Lorain's assistant fire chief believes workers encountered a pocket of carbon monoxide or other gas as a welder lit a torch. The enormous

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buildup of pressure from the explosion blew off the door at the top of the furnace, which stands several stories high.

Boilermaker Robert Chippy told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* that he was tossed like a football. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Somebody screwed up. If there was explosive gas, there shouldn’t have been a torch lit.”

Truck workers ratify contract

Members of the United Auto Workers at International Truck and Engine (Navistar) ratified a new five-year labor agreement covering 7,000 workers in five states by a 55-45 percent margin.

The agreement contains lump-sum payments equal to 3 percent of wages in the first, second and fourth year of the contract. In the third and fifth years workers will receive 3 percent wage increases. Pension benefit levels moved from a range of $32.65-33.40 per year of service to a range of $35.65-36.40. Benefits for current retirees will be $1,800 during the entire the five-year agreement. The agreement included provisions for reducing exposure to metalworking fluids, an environmental control program and an ergonomic program.

The contract also sets up a $300,000 fund for joint research on health and safety issues. Traditionally, such funds have been used more to enrich the UAW bureaucracy than the rank and file. UAW Vice President Nate Gooden, director of the Heavy Truck Department, said in a union news release, “Due to the downturn in the heavy truck industry, a sluggish economy and the impact of new environmental regulations on diesel engines, our priority during these negotiations was preserving jobs for our members and helping International find ways to succeed in the present environment.”

Worker-held stock being sold at United

An investment manager has begun to sell shares of United Airlines stock held on behalf of the carrier’s workers. State Street Bank & Trust Co., which was hired in August by a committee representing UAL employees, cited the danger of bankruptcy and began selling as many as 11 million of the 58 million shares held in the employee stock ownership plans. The move is being carried out, purportedly, to protect workers’ pension plans.

Previous to the August 14 announcement by UAL that it might declare bankruptcy, it was not legal to sell the shares. It is only at the point where the share price has collapsed to $2.50 that the sale is proceeding. The 55 percent majority share held by workers was touted by the International Association of Machinists and Air Line Pilots Association as a way for workers to have a say in running the company. But it has been workers who have paid for the indebtedness of the airline through job losses and pay cuts.

The IAM owns 20 percent of UAL stock, ALPA 25 percent, and the remaining 10 percent is held by nonunion salaried workers.

Carpenters head to return $200,000 from stock repurchase

The president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, Douglas McCarron, has announced he will return $200,000 in profits he made off a stock repurchase by Union Labor Life Insurance Company (Ullico).

The Labor Department has been investigating Ullico’s offer to McCarron and other union bureaucrats who sit on the company’s board of directors to purchase 4,000 shares of Ullico stock in 1999 at a price of $53.94. In May of 2000, the board set a share price of $146 and six months later offered to repurchase the stock, resulting in an overall total of $6 million in profits for board members.

This was done despite the fact that Ullico was heavily invested in Global Crossing and the telecommunications company’s shares had already lost half their value from their peak in 1999. Six months after the stock buyback, Ullico set their stock price back to $74.

Little progress in Edmonton hospital negotiations

About 475 workers—including housekeeping and food services workers, maintenance and clerical staff—at the Misericordia Hospital in Edmonton, British Columbia are demanding better wages and benefits, improvements to short term disability and family leave provisions. They are also asking that serious workload issues be addressed. Workers have been without a contract since April. On October 29 over 100 workers demonstrated outside the hospital, passing out information to passersby.

The workers are represented in their negotiations with the Capital Health Authority by Local 2111 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Little progress has been made in bargaining. The health authority has not offered any wage increase to food services and housekeeping workers, and has offered a paltry 2 percent to other workers in the bargaining unit. Wages currently range from $11.64/hour to $23.26/hour.

Housekeeper Leonie Ellis, whose hours were recently cut to one day a week from two days, told the *Edmonton Journal*: “These are the lowest paid people in the whole hospital and they’re going to save money on their backs.”

Simcoe-Muskoka teachers wage limited job actions

Elementary and secondary teachers employed by Ontario’s Simcoe-Muskoka Catholic District school board have been waging limited job actions against demands by the school board for concessions. At the secondary schools, job action has so far taken the form of rotating strikes, while at the elementary schools, teachers have engaged in work-to-rule action. Last week, some 600 teachers picketed outside the school board’s office, as the board inside held its regular meeting. Full strike action by the secondary teachers could begin on November 4, with bargaining continuing later in the week for the elementary teachers.

The teachers have been without a contract since September 1, and are demanding a 10 percent wage increase over two years. Last week, the school board offered 6.78 percent over two years to the secondary teachers, while also insisting that there be no cap on the number of students in a classroom, and that there be a reduction in teachers’ preparation time.

Physics teacher Jane Kubica said of these demands: “We need that extra time to get ready for class.... I already have 30 students in my class. We’re already having a hard time—how can we have more? It’s just crazy.”

Health workers in Northern Manitoba vote for strike

In Northern Manitoba, 175 health care support workers, represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, voted 92 percent in favor of strike action on October 28. The workers are employed by the Burntwood Regional Health Authority and work at a number of different facilities in Thompson, Gillam, Lynn Lake and Leaf Rapids. They have been without a contract since March 31.

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