

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 November 2002

Rio de Janeiro metalworkers take strike action

Rio de Janeiro state metal workers went on strike November 5. The workers are members of the Metalworkers Union of Rio de Janeiro (SMR). The decision followed an impasse in negotiations between the SMR and representatives of the main industries of the state. The union announced it would end the strike on November 14 if management addresses their demands.

The Rio metalworkers are demanding an 11 percent wage increase to compensate for inflation and a 5 percent increase in real wages, as well as changes in wage scales and a 40-hour workweek. Management is only offering 5.5 percent now and 1 percent next January.

Brazilian court employees to strike in Alagoas state

Court workers in the northeastern state of Alagoas went on strike November 5 demanding that the Alagoas courts grant them a 73 percent wage increase. Workers had been granted a 103 percent increase in 2000, of which the workers have only received 30 percent.

There are conflicting accounts of the impact of the strike. Only 150 of the 2,000 employees attended the meeting that voted to strike. The president of Alagoas courts, Fernando Tourinho declared that the courts were functioning normally on the first day of the strike.

Jobless protest in Buenos Aires

Thirty thousand workers protested November 7 in downtown Buenos Aires demanding the doubling of relief measures for the unemployed. Organizations representing the jobless organized a march from the legislature in Buenos Aires to the Labor Ministry, where Minister Graciela Camano met with delegates but refused their demands. At present the relief plans give workers government bonds worth approximately 150 pesos (about US\$40) each month.

Argentine layoffs continue

Government statistics indicate that 6,200 Argentine workers lost their jobs in October, down from 56,300 in September. Most sackings took place in construction and commerce. According to the Duhalde government, the “deceleration” in the layoff rate is a sign that the economic slump has “hit bottom.” However, the figures confirm that those industries and services that have begun to recover are still not hiring. Another factor that may account for the drop in layoffs is the drastic fall in real wages. Strike activity has dropped by 90 percent since last year, and wage cuts are being implemented across the board.

California nurses strike

Some 450 nurses at Doctors Medical Center facilities in the Bay Area struck November 4 after failing to reach agreement on a labor contract. The California Nurses Association charges that Tenet Healthcare Corporation, which owns the two facilities, is refusing to come into line with industry standards over issues such as staffing, pensions and retiree health benefits.

Nurses are seeking a guaranteed pension plan with post-retirement medical benefits. Tenet presently only offers a 401(k) plan and no medical benefits for retirees. The company has only offered to increase the 401(k) plan from 3 percent matching funds to 5 percent.

Nurses are also holding out for a limit on the number of weekly hours management can impose on them. Tenet has responded to the strike by hiring 138 replacement nurses.

Protest over loss of jobs at Pennsylvania industrial plant

Workers at GE Transportation Systems Incorporated in Erie, Pennsylvania quit their shifts two hours early November 7 to protest the transfer of union work to management employees. An official of the United Electrical & Machine Workers Local 506 said the union was within its rights and expected further actions unless the company addressed the local’s complaints, which have been submitted in grievances.

About 3,000 workers were involved in the protest, which began in the morning hours after the third shift clocked out. Workers on the first and second shifts followed suit by clocking out two hours early as well.

The union is also protesting a company decision to move jobs from the Erie plant to other locations both within and outside the United States. GE Transportation manufactures locomotives at the Erie facility.

United Airlines concessions welcomed by Wall Street

United Airlines stock tripled in value this week after the carrier secured concessions from its pilots and meteorologists unions. UAL claims the \$5.8 billion in labor concessions and \$7.7 in savings and revenue enhancements over the next five years will allow it to trim 10-15 percent from its operating costs.

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) offered \$2.2 billion in concessions on behalf of its 8,800 pilots, including an 18 percent pay cut. Pilots will not see an increase until 2005 when a 4.6 percent increase will be instituted and pay will only return to 2002 levels by the year 2008.

United—a so-called employee-owned company—has been seeking concessions as part of the terms demanded by the Bush administration’s Airline Transportation Stabilization Board for obtaining \$2 billion in federally backed loans. The ATSB is indicating that it will require still more concessions by workers before it will agree to the loan.

Meanwhile, ALPA sent a letter to the manager of the employees stock ownership plan (ESOP) asking it to stop selling off 11 million shares of the 59 million shares held by United workers in the company. Citing rules that required the ESOP plan to diversify once United announced its plans to declare bankruptcy, the manager began dumping shares near the company’s all-time low of \$1.42 a share. Employees originally paid about \$50 a share for the stock.

University of Massachusetts employees protest at trustees meeting

Over 200 University of Massachusetts professors and staff workers invaded a meeting of the college’s trustees to pressure the UMass president to lobby the state legislature for overdue wage increases.

The protesters chanted, clapped and heckled the trustees while

delivering a petition signed by 7,700 employees from all five campuses. It called on the college president, William Bulger, to lobby Massachusetts House Speaker Thomas Finneran to lead an override of Governor Jane Swift's earlier veto of some \$30 million in pay increases.

Bulger read a prepared statement to professors and workers defending the veto on the basis that the legislature had made even larger cuts in programs for the poor. During the meeting trustees voted to raise room and board fees and food service charges by 5-11 percent for the coming year.

Legal attack on Ohio steelworkers

A jury recommended the United Steelworkers pay \$4.3 million to AK Steel Company for damages stemming from an alleged slowdown, a refusal to work overtime, sabotage of equipment and disruption of production when workers clashed with security guards and strikebreakers during a 1999 lockout at the company's Mansfield, Ohio plant. The USW is considering its legal options. It can ask the judge to issue a judgment in its favor, despite the jury verdict, or appeal the decision to the US Circuit Court of Appeals.

AK Steel and the United Steelworkers reached an economic settlement of the three-year struggle about two months ago. But the company insisted on its right to refuse employment to workers it charged with violence or misconduct. Both sides filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board over this issue.

AK Steel's management typifies the thieving mentality that guided corporations in the 1990s. CEO Dick Wardrop is the highest-paid executive in the steel industry, with a combined income of \$23 million between 1997 and 2000. The USW claims that AK Steel employed an accounting technique that allowed it to estimate an average annual return for pension funds that had no basis in fact. The inflated pension earnings created a false impression of profits and helped trigger the flow of bonus money into the pockets of company executives.

Electrical Workers strike in Vermont

About 70 workers at the Fairbanks Scales factory in St. Johnsbury, Vermont walked out on strike November 4 against management's proposal for a pension freeze and a one-year contract offer. The company claims that workers will only lose one year of seniority and that next year they can renegotiate the contract.

Workers distrust management and fear a permanent freeze resulting in negligible pensions for younger workers. Fairbanks workers receive a monthly pension based on a rate of \$17.25 per year of service.

The company offered to open the books to United Electrical Workers 234 officials, but the union declined the offer. Management says it is contemplating the permanent replacement of striking workers.

Ontario Catholic school teachers strike

Over 400 teachers at the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board north of Toronto walked off the job November 4 following weeks of limited job action, including rotating strikes and work-to-rule sanctions at nine secondary schools in the region.

The teachers are members of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and are fighting on a range of issues including wages, pay equity and class size. Their school board is one of the fastest growing in the province. The teachers are paid on average up to 5 percent less than their counterparts at public school boards and in addition are being asked to increase class sizes at the discretion of the board.

Representatives for the school board say they are already spending over \$3 million more than they get from the provincial government for

teachers and are forced to take money from other areas in order to comply with new provincial laws prohibiting boards from running a deficit. School board officials have requested that the dispute be sent to joint arbitration, but the union has not yet responded to the proposal. No talks are currently scheduled and the board has indicated they may ask the provincial government to order an end to the strike if it drags on. At the same time, elementary schools in the same board began their own work-to-rule action on October 21 and may at some point take strike action.

Saskatoon library workers increase job action

Two hundred sixty library workers walked off the job last week, intensifying a job action that began with a series of rotating one-day strikes starting September 25. The strikers returned to work on November 8 after three days on the picket line when managers threatened a lockout.

The library workers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been without a contract since March 31. Outstanding issues center on pay equity and the demand for a job evaluation plan consistent with other civic workers. Wages for workers vary widely—from \$7.40 to \$25 an hour—and the union would like to narrow the disparity.

Throughout the dispute, library managers have replaced striking workers, although libraries have been forced to close on a number of occasions. The library board has taken out newspaper ads to discredit the union and bring public pressure to end the dispute. Management has asked that the union defer outstanding issues for study but has offered no provisions for implementing a pay equity agreement. Negotiations broke off October 31 and no new talks are currently scheduled.

BC grain workers to block shipments

Grain workers in British Columbia, who have been locked out since August 25, last week won a court ruling overturning restrictions on expanding their job action. Union officials say they now plan to disrupt shipping at the port facility in Prince Rupert.

About 80 members of the Grain Workers Union (GWU) were ordered to return to work last August when they joined a strike by their union in Vancouver. That ruling was overturned last week by the BC Supreme Court, paving the way for concerted action against Prince Rupert Grain, which uses both facilities. Unionized workers have been without a contract since the beginning of 2001. The BC Terminal Elevator Operators Association locked out the workers.

The job action now involves over 700 workers who proved to the court that they work for the same employer. They have been fighting for seniority rights and against mandatory overtime and the threatened loss of over 200 jobs if the company goes ahead with a plan to introduce nonunion hiring practices.



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