Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 November 2002

Chilean unions to mobilize this week

The Chilean Central Workers Union (CUT) announced November 16 that it will begin a series of mobilizations on November 19 over the collapse of wage negotiations for public workers. The actions will include marches and rallies by CUT members and will culminate in a national strike on November 27.

CUT President Arturo Martinez explained this series of demonstrations is in preparation for mass protests in April 2003. He urged workers in the private sector to take to the streets in support of public employees.

The 400,000 public employees are demanding a 6.5 percent wage increase and consider the government offer of 2.9 percent unacceptable. The strike on November 27 will coincide with a national strike by health workers. The government has threatened to use state security laws to jail strike leaders.

Chilean doctors, in struggle against the privatization of health services, also plan protests at four Santiago hospitals this week.

Bolivian union federation calls for increase in minimum wage

The Bolivian Workers Central (COB) is demanding a tripling in that nation’s monthly minimum wage, from Bs 430 (US$60) up to Bs 1290 (US$180). COB officials point out that while a substantial number of workers are getting paid minimum wage, many workers are on the books for the minimum but, in fact, receive more. Yet, when they retire, their pension is based on the lower amount.

So far the government and business executives have resisted raising wages. According to the National Statistics Institute, raises lag behind the official rate of inflation. The average Bolivian takes home about US$200 a month, though the distribution is very uneven, varying from industry to industry and across regions.

Colombian health workers stage hunger strike

Thirty workers have occupied the medical center in Barranquilla, Colombia for two weeks. They also began a hunger strike November 14. The workers are protesting the lack of funding for Barranquilla’s five hospitals. The workers decided on the hunger strike when they discovered the municipal council had appropriated only an additional 2,000 million pesos ($740,000) for the hospitals, a fraction of the 8,000 million pesos required to prevent the facilities’ closure and to pay health workers’ wages.

The workers, members of the Colombian Hospital Workers Union (ANTHOC), are determined not to end their hunger strike and have said they will not lift their occupation until the entire 8,000 pesos have been assured.

California hospital workers strike

Hospital support staff at Stanford and Lucile Salter Packard hospitals walked off the job November 13 to protest wage and staffing conditions. According to the Service Employees International Union, some 90 percent of the bargaining unit’s 1,400 workers joined the strike.

Workers rejected a 21 percent pay increase over the life of a three-year contract on the grounds it was still two to three dollars below the rate at other area hospitals. Further, it takes 15 years to reach full seniority, whereas workers at other hospitals can reach the top of scale at the end of three to seven years.

Hospital workers also consider the joint worker-management committees that are to arbitrate staffing and oversee care issues a sham that would simply serve to stall workers’ concerns.

Chicago grocery workers reject offer

Eighty percent of the 8,900 grocery workers employed at 113 Chicago-area Dominick’s supermarkets voted to reject the company’s offer last week, but the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) leadership declined to call a strike and indicated it wants to continue negotiating.

Safeway, the third-largest grocery operation in the United States and the parent company of Dominick’s, said it would not give in to union demands and threatened to shut down the chain unless the UFCW offers concessions.

Dominick’s is pushing for a four-year agreement containing no wage increases except for annual bonuses for clerks beginning at 25 to 35 cents an hour and increasing to 40 cents by the end of the contract. According to the UFCW, the company wants to slash health care benefits also.

Flight attendants union agrees to United concessions demands

The Association of Flight attendants (AFA) agreed to cut members’ wages by $412 million over a five-year period as part of the $5.8 billion cost-cutting plan sought by United Airlines. The AFA, representing 26,000 workers, becomes the second union at the airline to agree to concessions. The previous week pilots agreed to a $2.2 billion wage-cut plan. The International Association of Machinists has yet to agree on their portion of the bailout.

The AFA would not disclose exact details of the agreement until members vote on the plan at the end of November. In making the agreement, the AFA gave consent to management’s announcement last Friday to cut 2,700 flight attendants’ jobs. All told, the company said it would cut another 9,000 jobs.

Meanwhile, the Air Line Pilots Association has admitted that many of its pilots are angry over the sell-off of 11 million shares of company stock by the manager of the employee stock ownership plan. The manager announced the move when stock was at $2.36 a share. The stock continued to fall to $1.71, allowing Wall Street sharks to step in and get bargain prices while pilots and machinists had acquired the shares at an average price of $45 a share. Billionaire hedge fund manager George Soros has already purchased 3.5 percent of United.

Tentative agreement for engineers at Boeing

The Boeing Company and the union representing engineers and technical workers reached a tentative agreement on a three-year contract covering 18,000 employees last week. The pact increases annual salaries by a guaranteed 1.5 percent for engineers and a guaranteed 2 percent for technical workers with the possibility of increases as high as 4 percent on a discretionary basis.

Monthly pension benefits, presently rated at $50 for each year of service, will rise to $58 in the first year, $59 in the second and $60 in the last year of the contract. Workers will face increased healthcare co-payments and there are no job security provisions.

Workers would also receive a 6 percent lump-sum cash payment, averaging $4,800 for engineers and $3,430 for technical workers, providing the contract is approved by December 2. Boeing has wiped out 31,000 jobs in the last year and plans on announcing another 30,000 cuts before the end of the year.

The Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) added the following caveat when presenting the settlement to its members: “If this offer is rejected, there is little probability that the current offer would be improved in mediation and that a long protracted strike would be required for improvement.”

Michigan replacement worker killed at carton manufacturer facility

A 31-year-old worker brought in to replace locked-out workers at the Graphic Packaging Corporation (GPC) of Kalamazoo, Michigan was killed November 11 in an industrial accident. The worker, Jonathan Clark, was on a conveyer belt when a 2,000-pound paper bale fell on him. Clark had been working at the plant since October 15. A company spokesman said Clark had been properly trained but hinted that the worker was responsible for his own death by being on the conveyer belt.

GPC locked out its unionized workers at its mill and carton manufacturing operations in July. The 400 members of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) Local 1010, which represents workers at GPC’s two facilities, rejected the company’s last proposal. But when the union’s negotiators failed to reach a contract extension, the company locked the union out. GPC was demanding mandatory overtime up to 20 hours a week, a requirement to work all holidays, a two-tier pension system and revisions of the attendance policy.

Steelworkers rally on five-year anniversary of struggle

Seven hundred members of two Steelworkers locals gathered at the end of October to commemorate the fifth anniversary of their lockout against CF&I steel mill in Pueblo, Colorado. The National Labor Relations Board charged the company with 110 unfair labor practices leading up to the strike that occurred on October 3, 1997. The United Steelworkers isolated the strike and ultimately only 400 of the workers were rehired. Nearly 200 replacement workers continue to work at the plant.

Working conditions have continued to deteriorate in the last five years. In April 1999 the Occupational Safety and Health Administration charged the company with 61 serious, willful and/or repeat violations of federal regulations at the plant involving elevators with inadequate safety brakes, missing railings and fall protections over dangerous equipment.

In February 1999 a replacement worker had both his arms amputated when 34,500 volts of electricity passed through his body. In May of 1999, a union worker was killed by flying pieces of metal shrapnel when a critical coupling shattered during maintenance activity.

Minnesota teachers strike settled

Teachers in the southeastern city of Red Wind, Minnesota, voted by a 195-19 margin to end their month-long strike and return to work. Teachers originally struck for 6 percent in wage increases over a new two-year agreement. Education Minnesota, the teachers’ union, compromised for a 1 percent retroactive wage agreement covering the past year for which teachers went without a contract. For the present 2002-2003 school year, stepwise or staggered increases will average out to about 1 percent. The union also negotiated a contract for the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years that calls for yearly wage increases of 2.25 percent.

There was no change in the health insurance plan under which the school district pays 100 percent coverage for single teachers and 75 percent coverage for families. But teachers will have increased charges for deductibles, prescription co-payments and out-of-pocket expenses beginning January 2003.

The Red Wind strike was the second teachers strike in the state this year after a 10-year lull. At the beginning of the school year, teachers in International Falls, Minnesota struck for three weeks before reaching a settlement.

Telecommunications workers vote for strike mandate

Thirteen thousand workers at Telus, Canada’s second largest telecommunications company, have voted 84.5 percent in favor of job action. The workers have been without a contract since the end of 2000. Negotiations were set to resume between Telus and the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) on November 18.

During the summer, Telus announced it would cut 6,500 jobs through a combination of buyouts, retirements, and layoffs in an effort to cut $540 million in costs. Telus has also refused to pay overtime during evening hours. Shares in the corporation, which was formed from the 1999 merger of Alberta-based Telus with the British Columbia-based BC Tel., climbed sharply as investors rewarded the company’s cost cutting.

The Telecommunications Workers Union, which has endured two years of unsuccessful negotiations, has appealed to investors, seeking to replace Telus’s current chief executive, Darren Entwistle. Strike action would begin until early in the New Year, pending federal mediation.

Settlement in Ottawa cab drivers dispute

On November 15, Ottawa’s 1,000 cab drivers voted to accept the city’s latest offer. Throughout the previous week, the cab drivers had been staging various escalating forms of job action. From November 12 to 14, 95 percent of the cab drivers refused to take passengers. The cab drivers demanded the city stop issuing taxi licenses, that it allow eight-year-old vehicles to continue cab service, and that harassment by parking officials cease.

The city’s offer deferred the issue of vehicle age until next fall and declared that no new taxi licenses will be issued until 2004. The offer was only accepted by 80 percent of the cab drivers. Newspapers reported that some of the cab drivers who opposed the settlement accused the leadership of the Ontario Taxi Union of selling them short.

In the past year, the city’s taxi drivers have suffered from declining business and rising costs, including insurance premiums and fees to the cab companies. One web site cited the example of 46-year-old driver who earns $75-100 a day, after expenses of a similar amount.