

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 November 2002

Chilean unions to strike

The president of the Chilean Unitary Workers' Central (CUT), Arturo Martinez, declared November 24 that workers were set to strike on November 27 to protest the government's paltry offer of a 3 percent wage increase for public employees. Martinez accused the Lagos government of surrendering to corporate interests and to the International Monetary Fund to hold down wages.

Martinez commented on a declaration of Central Bank President Carlos Massad that government ministers are poorly paid. If that is the case, commented Martinez, "what should one say about the 700,000 Chilean workers who earn the minimum wage?"

Chilean doctors also plan to strike on November 27 against a law that opens the door to the privatization of public health services. Marisol Ruiz, president of the Group of General Practitioners (AMGZ) that represents doctors in 11 rural public assistance centers that treat 3 million people every year, announced his members would join with health workers and public employees in defense of public health services.

Ruiz indicated that the privatization plan would lead to the closure of the rural clinics, forcing users to travel long distances or go without medical care.

Chilean postal workers protests layoffs

On November 23 hundreds of postal workers protested in Santiago's Plaza de Armas against the announced layoff of 1,600 workers, 500 hundred of whom have already been sacked. The workers belong to five postal unions that jointly organized the demonstration. Luis Castillo, president of the Union No. 1 of Professional Technicians (STC), announced workers plan to continue protesting this week.

Postal workers see the layoffs as the first step to privatize the postal service. He pointed out that the new director of the post office, Jose Luis Maradones, has managed the privatization of other public enterprises in Chile, including coal mining. Maradones is threatening to shut down 300 local postal facilities.

Colombian health workers continue hunger strike

Thirty workers continue on hunger strike against the closure of the public hospitals in Colombia. Six of the protesters, who began their hunger strike on November 13, are said to be in precarious health. Meanwhile leaders of the Colombian Association of Hospital Workers (ANTHOC) presented their proposals to rescue hospitals in Barranquilla from the financial crisis that began in early November. The hospitals need an emergency infusion of \$4 million by year's end.

ILO cites violations of union rights in Colombia and Ecuador

On November 21 the Executive Council of the International Labor Organization (ILO) released a report that indicates union members are routinely being victimized in Colombia. Since last

June there have been 45 assassinations, 37 kidnappings and nine attempted murders, according to the report. Government authorities admit that the situation is progressively worsening.

The report also cites the repression of workers in Ecuador, including attacks on the right to strike. Earlier this year hundreds of armed men invaded banana plantations in Los Alamos and wounded 12 workers. They also harassed and sexually humiliated female workers. The outgoing government, led by Eduardo Noboa—who is a banana plantation owner himself—refused to investigate the incident. The ILO is calling for an investigation and compensation for the workers.

The ILO report also demands that the Ecuadorean government investigate the mass sacking of 3,500 public workers in Trujillo state. Regional authorities ignored orders to rehire the workers, according to the ILO.

Sao Paulo transit strike

Employees at Viacao Expresso Paulistano struck November 22 demanding their past-due wages. The strike involved 1,600 workers and paralyzed 328 buses that transport 100,000 passengers every day. An incident in which some buses were damaged discouraged other companies from providing vehicles to cover some of Viacao's routes.

Striking workers blocked the Sao Mateus Trolleybus terminal, causing gridlock in nearby streets. They vowed to continue their job action if back wages are not paid. Though their wages were only two days behind, workers pointed to a pattern of salary delays that they demand must stop.

United Airlines machinists offer concessions

The International Association of Machinists announced they will offer up to \$1.5 billion in concessions to United Airlines. The IAM is the last major union to capitulate to the concessions demands from the nation's number two air carrier. The company has threatened to declare bankruptcy if it does not secure \$1.8 billion in federally-backed loans, which the Bush administration has made contingent on the unions providing billions in give-backs.

The action by the union representing 37,500 machinists followed close on the heels of the announcement that nonunion salaried and management workers—not including officers of the company—will take pay cuts between 3 and 11 percent that add up to \$1.3 billion in wage cuts and other concessions.

The airline also announced it will slash 9,000 more jobs. Last week the company said it would furlough 2,700 flight attendants starting in January. "Our plan is intended to restore United's financial health," declared the company new chief executive, Glenn Tilton. While workers lost their jobs and gave concessions, the airline made a \$375 million payment on aircraft-backed securities, a payment that financial interests would not allow to be

rescheduled.

California court workers strike for better wages

A strike by 600 Santa Clara Superior Court workers November 18 brought proceedings at two courthouses to a halt and severely hampered business elsewhere among the 15 facilities that comprise the county's operations. Members of the Service Employees International Union Local 715 walked out to protest the county's wage offer, which includes a mere 2.5 percent increase in the first year with no increases in the second and third years of the contract. Workers are calling for 6 percent annual raises.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, "The judicial system is handcuffed without court reporters, as many defense attorneys proved Monday by refusing to waive their clients' right to have their cases reported 'on the record.'" A judge from nearby San Mateo County ordered 13 court reporters to report to work in an effort to curb the strike's effect. Another emergency order barred county attorneys—prosecutors and public defenders—from striking in sympathy.

Court officials have cited state budget restrictions as compelling them to restrict their offer. However, nearby San Mateo county court workers negotiated a contract providing for 14 percent wage increases over a four-year agreement.

Chicago grocery workers voting on tentative agreement

About 8,900 grocery workers began voting over the weekend on a new agreement reached between the Chicago grocery chain Dominick's and the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Neither union nor company officials would comment on the contract's details pending the outcome of the vote. The UFCW would only say the new agreement preserved the recently expired contract and includes a ratification bonus of an unknown amount.

The previous week workers rejected by an 80 percent margin a four-year tentative agreement that did not include a guaranteed wage increase. Dominick's President Scott Grimmer indicated that "we chose to work out a new contract and begin working on an orderly sale of the Dominick's assets. The alternative was a strike and an abrupt closure of the stores."

California hospital workers locked out after one-day strike

When some 150 service and technical workers attempted to return to work November 16 after a one-day strike, security guards for the Sutter Roseville Medical Center in California informed selected workers they could not resume their jobs until November 19. The lockout affected dozens of workers who were replaced by strikebreakers during the walkout.

"When our people went to work today, the hospital administrators had a list of people who were being allowed to work and another for those not allowed," explained John Simmons of the Service Employees International Union. "Some of our people were allowed in and some weren't." When the union, representing an overall total of 450 hospital workers, announced the one-day strike to protest the failure to reach an agreement, the hospital contracted to bring in replacement workers for five days. It opted to keep the replacements for the duration of the agreement, leaving union workers who were displaced out of work. The SEIU says the hospital must compensate workers for lost pay during this period. The hospital is refusing.

Hospital workers say their wages are below the industry average

and they want input on staffing levels. New negotiations are scheduled to resume this week.

BC health workers fight privatization

Hospital workers on the lower mainland of British Columbia staged a number of demonstrations outside hospitals and health centers last week to protest the privatization of hospital services in the province which was initiated by the provincial Liberal government earlier this year.

At least four people were arrested November 22 when a group of about 50 protesters attempted to stop a shipment of hospital laundry that had been contracted out of province to Alberta. Three members on the executive of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) and one other worker were charged by the RCMP for being in contempt of a court order that had been issued the day before to break up a blockade set up by workers.

Over 1,000 housekeeping workers are facing job losses as a result of cost-cutting measures introduced by the government. Their work will be contracted out to private companies that employ largely nonunion low-paid labor. It is expected that jobs in 32 different areas, including security, maintenance, purchasing and food services, will eventually be contracted out as a result of budget cuts.

Seven-month strike ends at Edmonton conference center

A strike that began last May by 270 service workers at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton was ended last week when the union leadership undertook to pass a proposed contract in order to facilitate festivities for this year's Grey Cup football championship.

No details have yet been released regarding the contract settlement between the employer, Economic Development Edmonton (EDE), which runs the center, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union representing strikers. The deal was reached on the basis of a mediator's report. Union President Doug O'Halloran explained the union's haste in holding a vote, saying, "We're going to try to ratify it in order to salvage the Grey Cup."

The union had been seeking recognition in a first contract battle with the EDE which had refused to negotiate prior to the appointment of a provincial mediator and had been using strikebreakers throughout the walkout. The union was seeking seniority rights and redress for widespread sexual and racial harassment complaints by employees.



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