

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 December 2002

Mass protest by the unemployed in Buenos Aires

On November 26, more than 10,000 people participated in a march honoring the memory of Maximiliano Kosteki and Dario Santillan, two unemployed youth killed by Argentine security forces on June 26 in the industrial suburb of Avellaneda. The marchers denounced police repression and the government's economic policies.

At the connecting bridge between Avellaneda and the Federal District, the marchers, including women and children, were blocked by federal police agencies, armed with water cannon, attack dogs and light tanks, demanding that protesters agree to body searches for weapons. The march was delayed by almost seven hours when marchers refused to be searched. Following negotiations with the picket organizations, the government finally relented and allowed the marchers through.

Picket representatives made it clear that the central theme of the protest was the miserable \$28 unemployment subsidies the government parcels out each month, as well as the democratic right to protest. Argentines have been shocked lately by reports of severe hunger in the country's interior, including the death by starvation of 11 children. In the northern province of Tucuman alone, 12,000 children are malnourished.

Santillan and Kosteki, the youth killed by police six months ago, belonged to one of the organizations of the unemployed.

Airport workers protest in Ecuador

On November 29, workers employed by the Civilian Aviation Agency (DAC) in Ecuador blocked the runways of the International Airports in Quito and Guayaquil to protest the sacking of some of their coworkers.

In Quito, DAC employees took over and set emergency vehicles on the runways, demanding that management cancel a plan to restructure the agency. In Guayaquil, DAC also put emergency vehicles on the runways in solidarity with their Quito coworkers.

Police used tear gas to force the workers off the runways. Quito Airport remained closed for the day.

Police arrest 18 in Santiago protest

On November 27, Santiago police arrested 18 protesters during the mobilization of the National Association of Fiscal Employees (ANEF) and the United Workers Central (CUT) protesting the government's offer of only a 3 percent wage increase for public employees.

The massive protest took place in front of the Moneda Palace, Chile's government house. More than 2,000 workers with signs and whistles demanded wage increases for public employees and teachers. Other signs demanded the government stop the project to privatize public health care services.

At the rally, CUT President Arturo Martinez announced that negotiations with the government had ceased, marking the start of a period of mobilization that will lead up to a general strike. "Workers have been respectful of democracy and social peace," Martinez said. "By its conduct, the government has broken all that."

Also on the same day, public health doctors carried out a national strike against a draft project that would contract-out health services, partially privatizing public health care. Over 90 percent of the doctors, more than 6,000, participated in the strike across Chile. President Lagos derided the work action as a "lost strike," vowing the project will go ahead regardless of what the doctors do.

Public health doctors battle police in El Salvador

On November 27 in San Salvador, a street battle between police and striking doctors left 10 injured from tear gas and rubber bullets. The doctors and their supporters, members of other Salvadoran unions, had congregated in several staging areas of San Salvador with the intention of marching toward the legislature when they were attacked by police.

The police withdrew when El Salvador's ombudsperson for Human Rights, Beatrice Carrillo, intervened. Carrillo condemned the police action and reported that innocent bystanders and patients in nearby hospital rooms all suffered the effects of the tear gas. She reported that at all times the doctors had behaved in a peaceful manner.

The doctors have carried out strike action since September 18 in an attempt to prevent the privatization of the public health sector. Two weeks ago negotiations began between the doctors and the government of Francisco Flores, but no results have yet been reported.

Colombian oil workers fight take-backs

On November 27, Colombian oil workers were informed at regional assemblies that the state-owned oil company, Ecopetrol, intends to challenge workers' contractual rights in the contract currently being negotiated. Ecopetrol appealed to the labor ministry to remove contract language that restricts its right to contract-out work, to introduce a lesser retirement benefit for new employees, to replace seniority-based promotions with a so-called merit system and to subcontract the operations of company-owned schools and of company-provided meat deliveries to workers' families.

Oil workers representatives declared that they will not negotiate any of these take-backs and threatened to strike unless Ecopetrol drops them. Instead, their union is demanding a 27 percent increase in wages and benefits. Negotiations for a new contract covering 4,000 of Ecopetrol's 7,400 workers are to begin this month.

US Airways lays off 2,500 more workers

US Airways, the nation's seventh largest air carrier, announced it will slash 2,500 more jobs in order to meet the requirements of the Airline Transportation Stabilization Board (ATSB) for a \$900 million federal loan.

The job cuts will affect 800 flight attendants, 500 mechanics, 800 customer service agents, 60 pilots and 331 reservation agents located in Tampa and Orlando, Florida.

The layoffs are a new round of cuts coming on top of a previous \$1.3 billion reduction in costs. More layoffs are expected. Ultimately, US Airways will end up with a total workforce of some 30,000 employees, down 36 percent from the 46,579 who worked for the

company previous to September 11, 2001.

Statistics reveal that US Airways has suffered more than any other airline in the downturn in air travel. It ranks ninth among the ten largest US carriers in the percentage of seats filled. According to analysts, the carrier's short-haul routes, where travelers have the option of driving or taking a train, have been hardest hit.

Federal workers picket airports to protest Bush privatization

Air traffic controllers and other Federal Aviation Administration workers picketed airports November 27 to protest plans by the Bush administration to privatize FAA services.

Members of New England's National Association of Air Traffic Specialists, picketing at Bradley International Airport in Connecticut, denounced Bush plans to take the work of more than 850,000 jobs presently performed by federal employees and turn them over to private contractors. Many air traffic controller duties at smaller airports have already been privatized.

FAA workers at Reno/Tahoe International Airport in Nevada also picketed. They provide pilots with weather briefings and initiate searches when aircraft don't arrive on time. Many of their jobs will be lost, forcing Nevada pilots who don't fly for the military or commercial airlines to rely on air traffic specialists in another state instead of local FAA personnel. There are 61 flight service stations nationwide that could be affected by the privatizations.

No settlement in New Jersey industrial strike

Workers at a Lodi, New Jersey hospital equipment manufacturer entered their third month on strike this week with no prospects for a settlement. Seventy workers originally struck Blickman Health Industries in opposition to the company's attempt to increase health insurance co-payments by 70 percent.

The company has fired 25 of the workers and permanently replaced them. Sheet Metal Workers Local 25 charges the move was a scare tactic which has caused 35 members to resign from the union and return to work. But beyond strike pay and food donations, the strikers have been left to fend for themselves by the New Jersey AFL-CIO.

The union originally sought a 5.25 percent wage increase for each year of a three-year agreement and a limit on insurance co-payments of 35 percent of total premium costs for families and 15 percent for single employees. Blickman offered wage increases of 3.5 percent, 4 percent and 4.5 percent for the three years of the contract.

California court workers strike settled

Court workers for Santa Clara County, California voted to end their strike and returned to work November 22. The 650 court reporters, clerks, research attorneys and other court personnel voted by a 67 percent margin to accept a new tentative agreement.

No details were immediately released on the terms of the contract. The bargaining committee for Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 715 gave a unanimous recommendation for the new agreement.

County negotiators originally offered workers a 2.5 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract with no subsequent increases. The union had been seeking 6 percent annual raises over the course of the agreement. Job flexibility also played a role in bargaining.

The strike brought proceedings at two courthouses to a halt and severely paralyzed operations at another 15 county facilities, forcing officials to appeal to a judge from a neighboring county to order 13 court reporters to perform essential work.

Simcoe Muskoka teachers strike faces back-to-work order

On November 25, the Ontario Tories introduced back-to-work

legislation against striking high school teachers in the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District. Because the NDP (New Democratic Party) voted against the legislation in the first reading, it will be at least a week until the legislation is actually passed and teachers return to work.

In total, some 400 teachers—both secondary and elementary—are on strike in the school district, located north of Toronto. Their demands cover a range of issues, including wages, pay equity and class size. The teachers make 5 percent less than their counterparts in the public system, and are faced with demands by the school board for increased class sizes.

At this point, back-to-work legislation has not yet been introduced against the striking elementary teachers. The latest proposal by the school board to the elementary teachers offered the same wage as in a previously rejected offer, and tied the offer to further concessions on the part of the teachers.

Tory legislation prohibits school boards from running a deficit. Representatives of the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board claim that they are already spending \$3 million more for teachers' salaries than is allocated by the Tories' funding formula, and have had to draw this money from other budgets. This gives the lie to the Tory claim, during the recent confrontation with Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton school boards, that school boards outside of the urban areas have been able to balance their budgets and still provide all necessary services.

Strike delayed at Ipsco in Regina and Calgary

Steelworkers in Calgary, Alberta and Regina, Saskatchewan gave notice of their intention to strike at two facilities of Ipsco Inc., a steel manufacturer. Strike action was set to commence before the weekend, but a last-ditch attempt by a mediator saw both sides agree to another negotiating session to be held on December 2.

The 230 Calgary steelworkers and 800 Regina steelworkers, represented by the United Steelworkers of America, have been without a contract since July 31. The strike notice was in response to management's take-it-or-leave-it offer, backed up with the threat of a lockout. The main issues in the dispute are wages, pensions, profit-sharing and the contracting-out of services.

Saskatoon Public Library strike ends

On November 26, 260 Saskatchewan Public Library workers voted to end their strike. Since September 25, the library workers had been involved in escalating job actions in support of demands for pay equity and a job evaluation plan consistent with that afforded other civic employees. They had been without a contract since March 31.

The agreement between the library and the Canadian Union of Public Employees provides for wage increases of 4 percent, 4 percent and 3 percent over the next three years.



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