

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 December 2002

Argentine unions call for national strike

The Argentine Workers Central (CTA) called for a national 24-hour strike on December 20, to mark one year since mass mobilizations ended the De la Rúa regime. The main objective of the strike is to protest “hunger, economic corruption and repression,” according to the union federation, and to demand that all government posts be renewed in the coming elections. In addition, the rallies on the day of the strike will commemorate those who died a year ago from police repression. The economic crisis has led to the deaths of hundreds of children from hunger and thrown millions of workers into poverty.

Colombia: Ecopetrol strike threatened over dismissal of oil workers

The Colombian United Workers Syndicate (USO) that represents oil workers in Cartagena and Barranca Bermeja is demanding that 11 fired workers be rehired and that union officials be allowed to enter the refineries. A workers assembly in Barranca Bermeja on December 2 voted to strike.

The state-owned oil company, Ecopetrol, has militarized the refineries and is not allowing union officials to enter the premises. The USO is threatening to launch a general oil workers strike unless the measures are rescinded. Ecopetrol is demanding that the USO surrender clauses in the current contract that restrict the use of outside contractors. Ecopetrol is also demanding that new employees have lesser pensions than in the current contract.

Eleven workers, including the head of the Cartagena USO local, were fired on November 29 in reprisal for so-called “labor irregularities,” including a 36-hour work stoppage on November 19-20 at the Mamonal plant in Cartagena. That walkout was in response to Ecopetrol’s refusal to make temporary workers permanent. Ecopetrol put the refinery under military control and abolished the contract.

Utility workers strike in Rio de Janeiro

Employees of Light Company, Rio de Janeiro’s electric utility, went on strike December 4. The French transnational Electricité de France controls the privatized company. The Rio de Janeiro Energy Workers and Engineers Union is demanding a 5 percent wage increase and job security. Light agreed to the raise but not to the job security demand. The strike is of indefinite duration.

Thirty years for Mexican wages to recover purchasing power

It will take another 30 years for Mexican workers to recover the purchasing power they enjoyed before the debt crisis and peso collapse of the 1970s, “assuming that the minimum wage increases by 2 percent” above inflation each year, according to a study by CI, an international consulting firm. Throughout the past three decades wages have only narrowly exceeded inflation. According to the study, under the most optimistic economic conditions 2003

wages will only rise by 2 percent.

Such a favorable outcome is unlikely. Job creation has slowed down and job losses accelerated during upswings and downswings in the business cycle, compared to decades past. A slight contraction in 2001 caused the destruction of 382,000 jobs, while an expansion in 2002 only created 80,000 new jobs, according to the document “CISComentario.”

Settlement annulled in strike at New York federal facility

A three-month-long strike at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center in the New York City area continues after the International Union of Operating Engineers and LB & B Associates—a Maryland subcontractor that manages maintenance work at the facility—clashed over the status of replacement workers in a contract ratified by union members.

The strike by 76 members of the Operating Engineers Local 30 began on August 30 in a dispute over wages and benefits. On November 14, LB & B put forward a new tentative offer that contained a provision to retain 45 replacement workers while barring the return of some strikers—a provocative proposal that workers voted down.

On November 22 LB & B issued a proposal that reverted to the old contract of August 30 and did not mention replacement workers. After workers voted to accept the contract, the company challenged the union’s position that all union workers could reclaim their jobs while replacement workers would be excluded from the settlement. The result is that the strike is ongoing and the union has filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board.

The Plum Island laboratory—an isolated island located off the North Fork of Long Island, conducts scientific study of dangerous infectious animal diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease. The facility will fall under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security on June 1 and the Bush administration has insisted that the war against terrorism requires the undermining of workers’ rights in the newly aggregated department.

Nurses strike Hawaii hospitals

Nurses at three hospitals in Honolulu, Hawaii went out on strike last week after rejecting contract offers. About 540 nurses at both the Kuakini Medical Center and the St. Francis Medical Centers walked out on December 2, followed by 800 nurses at the Queen’s Medical Center the following day.

Wages, retirement benefits, nurse-to-patient ratios and the retention of nurses were all sticking points in the bargaining sessions. Management at Queen’s hospital wants to take away sick days and substitute a plan that would offer paid time off to those nurses who maintain good attendance records. The nurses responded by demanding an increase in staffing to avoid overwork

and greater stress, which, given their environment, increases their susceptibility to illness.

No negotiations were slated for the remainder of the week. Hospital management brought in replacement nurses to continue operations. The previous week the Hawaii Nurses Association negotiated separate agreements with two other Honolulu hospitals.

Strike at Chicago tortilla plant in third month

Workers at Azteca Foods are well into their third month on strike as they seek their first union contract with the Chicago-based tortilla maker. Last April the 63 workers voted unanimously to join the United Electrical Workers Union Local 1159.

However, company CEO Arthur Velasquez refused to bargain seriously with the workers, who are demanding increased pay from the present \$9 an hour, safer working conditions, improved retirement benefits and the right to distribute union flyers in non-work areas during breaks. Workers walked out September 30.

Velasquez is attempting to run the food operation with replacement workers. Azteca produces 500,000 tortillas a day and has annual revenues of \$30 million or more.

New negotiations in Washington state garbage strike

The Teamsters union and negotiators for Waste Connections, Inc., which contracts to haul trash for Mason and Pierce counties in Washington state, met last week to hold new talks. The 55 refuse haulers struck Waste Connections on October 7 to protest working conditions. "We work 12-, 14-hour days. We eat our lunch while we're driving," a striker told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Waste Connections is attempting to maintain operations with the use of replacement workers.

Workers strike Minnesota sewage plant

Sewage treatment workers in Duluth, Minnesota walked out on strike December 3 to oppose the decision by district management to increase health insurance premiums from 10 to 20 percent, double co-payments for office visits and prescription drugs, and lay off permanent workers while keeping temporary workers.

Some 85 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), who perform various tasks related to water treatment, have charged that the company cannot safely operate the Western Lake Superior Sanitary facility safely using managers and contract workers from private companies.

California nurses strike Tenet hospitals

Members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) are continuing a strike against Tenet hospitals in San Pablo and Pinole, California. Tenet Healthcare operates 113 hospitals across the United States and 43 in California. The CNA has released data indicating that Tenet drastically overcharges patients for medicine. Tenet accounts for 6 percent of all drug charges in the US, although it represents only 2 percent of hospitals.

The federal government has launched an investigation into allegations that Tenet overcharges for workers compensation claims. It is also charged that Tenet manipulated Medicare reimbursements to boost profits.

Nurses have been on strike at the two California hospitals since November 4. They walked out over Tenet's refusal to grant pensions or retiree health benefits.

Niagara hotel workers begin strike action

Workers at a number of major hotels in Niagara Falls, Ontario

undertook a one-day strike December 7 as part of what the union has said will be an ongoing campaign to pressure their employer to resume contract talks. Hundreds of workers turned out to block entrances to the Sheraton and Brock hotels as well as other locations, in protest of management tactics.

The 600 strikers include attendants, valets, maintenance staff and restaurant employees who have been fighting for a new contract with Canadian Niagara Hotels, one of the largest employers in the Niagara area. They are represented by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), which has said it will continue one-day strikes without notice until management resumes contract negotiations. They undertook job action after an anticipated lock-out set for December 2 did not materialize.

The union has filed a number of complaints with the Ontario Labour Relations Board to protest what they have called intimidation and abuse by the employer throughout the bargaining process. The company has reportedly refused to negotiate on key issues such as retirement and other benefits for their employees who are notoriously underpaid and overworked. The union had been seeking improvements in wages, job security and working conditions in talks, which broke off on November 8. No new talks have yet been scheduled.

Postal workers protest racist politics

About 40 postal workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan staged a demonstration at the riding office of Jim Pankiw, an independent Member of Parliament, for being forced to deliver flyers published by his office which are overtly racist.

Pankiw, a notorious bigot, was formerly with the right-wing Canadian Alliance Party, until he was expelled last summer for speaking out against what he called the spinelessness of that organization. His latest attack is contained in a flyer titled "Indian Crime," directed against the native people of Saskatchewan. Lawyers for Canada Post insist that the document is not illegal and that carriers who refuse to deliver it could be suspended or disciplined.



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