

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 December 2002

Chilean public health doctors to strike against privatization

The council of health unions (CONGRES) ordered workers to punch their timecards when they got to work Monday, December 16 to make it difficult for government authorities to victimize workers who are joining a three-day strike. Public health doctors are demanding the government cancel plans to privatize public health care. Rallies will take place across the country. Mayors around the Santiago Metropolitan Region demanded that the health ministry impose sanctions on the strikers.

700,000 public employees temporarily sacked in Peru

Peruvian public employees are being forced to accept “extended vacations” until January 3 as part of across-the-board budget cuts in services. The Peruvian government plans to have minimal public services until then. The government denied that these temporary layoffs are a pretext to evaluate personnel and permanently fire many of them. This is the first time in history the Peruvian government laid off nearly all of its public employees.

Oil workers struggle continues in Colombia

Isaac Yanovich, president of Colombia’s state-owned oil company Eco Petrol, announced that in case of a strike by oil workers at the Barranca Bermeja and Cartagena refineries management would take over operations. Yanovich also said there’s no turning back from the unilateral cancellation of the labor contract with the oil workers union (USO). Eco Petrol has cancelled company pensions for all new workers and is not allowing union representatives to enter its Cartagena plant.

AK Steel ends three-year lockout of steelworkers

AK Steel announced December 10 the end of a three-year lockout of the United Steelworkers union at its Mansfield works in north-central Ohio. Management made the announcement after union officials issued a letter to the company that it agreed in principle to demands contained in the proposal made by the company last July.

It is not clear what terms the USW has agreed to. Some workers disagreed with the pulling of pickets until the situation is clarified or workers have returned to work.

The company has said it will initially recall 30 out of the 620 locked-out production and maintenance workers. AK Steel has maintained production during the lockout with about 250 nonunion temporary workers. It is possible these workers will be retained.

Last month, AK Steel won a \$4.3 million judgment against the union, charging workers with a slowdown, sabotage of operations and the refusal to work overtime. The lockout, which began September 1, 1999, witnessed a picket line battle between workers and security guards in its opening days.

Domino Sugar workers strike Baltimore plant

About 330 workers at Domino Sugar’s Baltimore, Maryland plant walked out on strike December 8 for the first time in the company’s 80-year history. Contract talks have broken off between the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 392 and management at the Baltimore plant—one of the largest sugar refineries in the world.

The strike was provoked by Domino’s demand that pensions be transferred to a management company, a move that has not been explained to the satisfaction of workers. The company also is seeking to burden workers with increased health care costs and fewer paid holidays.

Domino continues some plant operations with 150 nonunion workers. While the Baltimore plant has been strike free, other Domino plants have suffered strikes, with one lasting up to two years.

Striking Hawaii nurses appeal for support

Striking nurses from three hospitals in Honolulu made public appeals for support for their work stoppage in the wake of attempts to vilify them in the media. About 100 nurses packed the offices of the Hawaii Nurses Association, December 13, with many making statements to the press.

“Nurses are tired of doing so much for so little for so long and we need to change that,” a nurse at Kuakini Hospital told KITV news. “How safe does the public feel that your exhausted nurse, who is working 16 hours, is taking care of you? They are doing mandatory overtime, they are understaffed,” another said.

Management has sought to intimidate strikers with threats and slander. In the early days of the walkout three nurses left the picket line to help a woman from her car into the emergency room. Security took down the names of the nurses and warned that should they step on hospital property a second time they would be cited for trespassing.

Union appeals rebuffed in strike at Chicago tortilla plant

The United Electrical Workers Union Local 1159 has been rebuffed in its strategy of attempting to bring pressure to bear on the owner of strikebound Azteca Foods tortilla plant by appealing to bankers, academia and the clergy. Such publicity

stunts have long been used by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy as a substitute for a mobilization of the working class.

In October the union held a demonstration in front of LaSalle Bank in downtown Chicago to request that Azteca Foods owner, Arthur Velasquez, be dropped from its board of directors. The following month it appealed to Cardinal Francis George. Most recently, the union appealed to the University of Notre Dame, where Velasquez serves as a trustee, to pressure the tortilla producer.

Both LaSalle Bank and Notre Dame refused to intervene and a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Chicago only said it “may look into it.”

The 63 Azteca workers have been on strike for three months. The workers decertified Distillery Workers Local 3 last April and voted in the United Electrical Workers Union. Workers are demanding a \$2-an-hour wage increase over a three-year contract and a bonus for future retirees equal to \$250 for each year of service. Velasquez is pushing for an increase in health insurance premiums from \$10 to \$70.

Tentative agreement in Minnesota sewerage strike

Striking workers for the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District (WLSSD), located in Northeastern Minnesota, are considering a tentative agreement aimed at bringing a two-week strike to a close. Negotiators for the WLSSD and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 66 reached a tentative agreement December 12, but declined to reveal details pending the ratification vote by the 85 bargaining unit members.

The tentative agreement came in the wake of WLSSD management’s agreement to withdraw contract language that would have allowed them to lay off full-time workers while retaining part-time employees. The WLSSD’s original proposal called for the doubling of employees’ costs for insurance premiums, co-payments for medical visits and prescription drugs. In addition, a 10.5 percent pay increase was spread across a three-year contract.

The attempt by management to place the burden of the state’s recently announced \$4.5 billion deficit on the backs of workers drew opposition as strikers pointed to WLSSD’s executive director Kurt Soderberg’s annual salary of \$104,370. The president of the WLSSD’s board of directors defended Soderberg, saying, “I’m very embarrassed his salary is as low as it is.” The average wage of union workers during all of 2001 was about \$41,209, excluding overtime.

Nurses unionize at largest California nonprofit hospital

Nurses at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, the West Coast’s largest nonprofit hospital, voted by a 695-627 margin to join the California Nurses Association (CNA). Cedars-Sinai said it would scrutinize the union’s conduct during the drive for unionization to determine whether it might be able to block certification of the vote.

In the week prior to the vote CNA nurses at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, the state’s second largest private

hospital, obtained a 21 percent pay raise over three years. According to the CNA, nurses in Southern California earn an average 25 percent less than nurses in the northern part of the state.

Nova Scotia Community College faculty vote to strike

On December 11, 600 faculty members at the Nova Scotia Community College voted in favor of strike action. Their main demands are for improvements to salary, working conditions and sick leave provisions.

The teachers, who are represented by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, have been without a contract for almost one-and-a-half years—since July 31, 2001. Strike action, however, is not legal until at least 46 days after a report is filed by the Department of Labour conciliation officer who has been working to bring the two sides to a negotiated settlement for the past two months.

Niagara hotel workers narrowly ratify compromise settlement

Six hundred hotel workers in Ontario’s Niagara tourist region narrowly ratified a settlement with their employer, Canadian Niagara Hotels. The final vote was 258 to 256 in favor of the agreement. The employer’s offer had been made immediately following a day of picketing outside the entrances of the Sheraton on the Falls hotel, the Brock Hotel, the Hard Rock Cafe and the Terrace Food Court. According to union sources, this was the first job action of its kind in the history of the Niagara Falls tourism industry.

The workers, who include attendants, valets, maintenance staff and restaurant workers, are represented by Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) Local 75, and had been demanding improvements to wages, benefits, job security and retirement conditions. According to the president of the union local, Paul Clifford, the settlement includes a wage increase but at the same time divides the hotel workers into separate restaurant and hotel groups, and includes reductions in job security.

Air Transat workers reach tentative deal

Eleven-hundred flight attendants at Air Transat, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have reached a new tentative deal with their employer. Last week they voted down a tentative contract offer produced with the help of a federal conciliation officer. Details of the new settlement have been kept confidential and a ratification vote is to proceed on December 20.



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