

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 December 2002

Public health strike in El Salvador

Public health doctors in San Salvador, who have been engaged in a struggle against privatization of national health services, rejected the latest government offer to settle the conflict. Eighty percent, or 800, of Social Security doctors are currently on strike.

In return for ending their strike and taking on a large backlog of patients, the Salvadoran government had offered a \$1,500 wage advance.

In a speech to the nation, President Francisco Flores told doctors that if they reject the government offer they would be fired.

The doctors are demanding their back pay since September. Last month, the legislature passed a measure that suspended plans to outsource public health services to private providers. Heavy pressure by the private firms that would have had to end their contract with the government this January caused the legislature to reverse itself last week.

Chilean walkout against privatization of health care

Doctors and public health care workers carried out a two-strike on December 16-17 against a plan that would privatize portions of Chile's public health services. The Lagos government declared that the mobilizations had been "a failure" and decreed that the government would sanction the strikers. Health workers unions declared that the job action had been supported by 90 percent of the workers. At the same time, they also said that some 1,000 public health workers across Chile had submitted their resignations to protest the privatization plan.

Workers demand funding for public hospitals in Uruguay

Doctors and public health workers initiated a 24-hour strike on December 23 in Uruguay to demand greater appropriations for public hospitals and clinics. On Friday, December 20, the Montevideo's Clinicas Hospital's emergency room was forced to shut down because it had run out of critically needed basic medications and supplies.

The protest strike took place to pressure the legislature. Hearings on the health emergency in both the public and private sectors are to begin December 23.

The government is proposing a plan of global purchases of medications, which it thinks will relieve the health emergency sometime this January.

One year since collapse of De La Rúa government in Argentina

Amidst a massive police presence of 10,000 officers, thousands of workers and other protesters came together in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo to commemorate the events of last December, which culminated in the resignation of President Fernando De La Rúa and revealed the depth of Argentina's economic collapse.

Columns of workers and unemployed rallied across from Argentina's Government House in this historic square. Large contingents streamed in from Buenos Aires' industrial belt. Many others had marched from distant regions to protest hunger and unemployment. They were joined by student and human rights organizations. This Christmas season is considered the worst in Argentina's history, despite a modest increase in assistance to the most impoverished layers by the Duhalde administration.

On December 20, 2001, five protesters were killed at Plaza de Mayo by police during demonstrations that forced De La Rúa to resign. Twenty-seven other protesters were killed in other cities during two days of demonstrations on December 19 and 20. The protests on December 20 were peaceful. Since then, real wages have fallen by more than 40 percent and one in four Argentine workers is unemployed as a consequence of a recession that began in 1998.

United Airlines issues concessions ultimatum

United Airlines warned last week that if it did not reach agreements on a new round of deeper concessions by December 26 it would ask a bankruptcy judge to initiate court proceedings to void union contracts.

The request is part of the federal bankruptcy code, which allows corporations to cancel labor agreements on the grounds that they hinder a company's ability to restore profitability. United says it has until February 15 to obtain concessions that meet the requirements laid down by banks that are underwriting the company's restructuring during bankruptcy.

The leaderships of the various unions at United issued perfunctory statements concerning the company's new ultimatum. The Machinists union said it "is not a surprise" and the flight attendants union said it was "routine and expected."

Pilots union gives more concessions to US Airways

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) agreed to another \$100 million in concessions to US Airways as the nation's sixth largest airline attempts to come out of bankruptcy by slashing workers' living standards.

The concessions involve changes in productivity and work

rules, temporary wage cuts and pension and benefit reductions. In previous wage and benefit concessions ALPA gave up about \$465 million. The new givebacks will be added to an overall concessions package by all unions at US Airways totaling \$1.3 billion.

Following the announcement the company issued a press release, declaring, "US Airways continues to have productive discussions with its other unions on further cost-cutting measures." The company is using concessions to win \$900 million in federally-backed loans.

Wal-Mart found guilty of cheating workers out of overtime pay

An Oregon jury found Wal-Mart guilty of violating federal and state wage laws in a lawsuit involving about 400 of the state's workers employed by the retail giant. The suit accused Wal-Mart management of forcing employees to continue working after clocking out and reprimanding workers who tried to claim overtime.

A Wal-Mart spokesman reacted to the jury verdict, saying Wal-Mart "has a strong policy of paying its associates for all the time they work." But the Oregon trial is only the first of several cases involving Wal-Mart. Another 39 class-action lawsuits are pending in 30 states, involving hundreds of thousands of workers and tens of millions of dollars in back pay.

The Oregon proceeding did not award financial compensation. A separate trial will be held to determine monetary damages in the case.

Ohio teachers strike nears three months

Negotiators for Ohio's Eastern Local School District in Pike County and the union representing 53 teachers and 25 support staff failed to reach an agreement after eight hours of contract talks December 17.

Teachers originally walked out on September 26 over the amount they would have to pay for insurance coverage and other issues. The strike has affected some 900 students from kindergarten through the 12th grade.

The district, situated about 70 miles south of Columbus, has shown little interest in reaching an agreement. It responded to the strike by bringing in substitute teachers and hiring security guards. In November, the teachers union obtained documents showing the district had spent \$118,000 on security. The Ohio Department of Education conducted a review of the district and cited several problems, including substitute teachers with improper or unverified credentials. The actions of the school board and Superintendent Treva Harmon have so enraged teachers and parents that county officials felt compelled to send a letter to the district warning of the adverse impact the strike was having on the community.

Union infighting in airline merger

The takeover of Canadian Airlines by Air Canada has produced bitter infighting among respective unions and undermined any common struggle by workers for a new

contract.

Employees for Air Canada's new discount subsidiary, Zip, have filed an application with the Industrial Relations Board to seal the ballot votes for a new contract, under conditions where workers from formerly competing companies are vying against each other for remaining jobs and benefits. The contract in question involves 8,000 flight attendants who were set to vote on a new contract when an arbitrator ruled that the union executive should be removed because its election was not legitimate. At the same time attendants are pitted against each other over an agreement which gives \$26 million in loyalty bonuses to former Air Canada employees.

The company has sought to use the merger to wrest concessions from the competing bargaining units. The union leadership has bolstered this tactic by placing control of their respective territorial dominions ahead of the welfare of the union membership.

Civic workers set to strike in Nelson, British Columbia

About 80 municipal workers who have been without a contract since last February voted overwhelmingly last week to take strike action. The vote by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 339 was taken when negotiations, which had broken off, resumed last Tuesday with the employer bringing further demands to the table, including concessions on sick leave benefits, replacements and job security provisions. The union had said that the new demands might constitute a breach of labor laws, but opted to request a mediator to settle the dispute.

Contract squeaks past at Niagara hotels

The dispute at a number of prominent hotels in Niagara Falls, Ontario, was settled last week when workers narrowly voted to accept the second offer from employers with a vote of 258 to 256 in favor, despite a negative recommendation by the union leadership.

The vote was held following an unprecedented one-day strike by workers at a number of locations, including the Sheraton and Brock hotels. One of the major concessions in the new contract is the separation of hotel and restaurant bargaining units.



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