# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**7 January 2003**

**Transit strike in Uruguay**

Montevideo public transit workers went on a 48-hour strike January 6 over wages. The walkout was sparked by the city's decision not to dedicate a portion of a recently approved 10 percent fare increase to wages. Transit companies had demanded the higher fares to cover increases in fuel expenditures.

Inflation in Uruguay this year reached 25 percent. Prices are expected to rise again in 2003 by 30 percent, severely undercutting purchasing power for the working class.

**Rail workers occupy company headquarters in Uruguay**

About 500 union rail workers took over the Administration of State Railroads to protest a government plan to put the railroads under the Ministry of Transportation. The protesters see this move as a first step toward the dismantling of the rail system and the layoff of 1,100 workers

**Social Security employees march on Mexico City**

Over 2,000 protesters from 16 Mexican states marched on January 6 in front of Mexico's Government House—Los Pinos—demanding a shorter workday. Early in the morning, workers rallied at the Mexican Institute for Social Security.

**Sao Paulo subway workers threaten to strike this week**

Sao Paulo Metro workers are poised to strike on January 7 after the collapse of government mediation to solve an impasse between workers and management. The workers are demanding immediate payment of productivity bonuses. Metro management declared it will not have money to pay the workers until January 30.

**Salvador rejects international mediation in doctors strike**

On January 5 the government of El Salvador rejected a proposal that international mediators help resolve the strike by public health doctors employed by the Social Security agency. Doctors and health workers have been on strike since last September.

The strikers are demanding the government rescind plans to privatize the health care system, that they receive their back pay and that there be no firings of striking health workers. Over 80 percent of the system's 1,000 doctors are on strike.

Two weeks ago the government of Francisco Flores issued an ultimatum demanding health care professionals go back to work in return for a $1,500 advance. The government threatened to replace doctors who did not return to work.

**Unions at GE threaten strike over hike in healthcare co-pays**

The United Electrical Workers (UE) and the International Union of Electrical-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) announced they would set a strike date January 7 that could potentially involve 17,500 workers in the wake of General Electric Company's January 1 implementation of a 40 percent increase in medical co-payments.

The increase covering the costs associated with doctor visits and other healthcare expenses will rise from $500 to $700 a year. Other medical costs will go up as well. GE reports that its health care costs have gone up 45 percent, from $965 million in 1999 to $1.4 billion in 2002.

But workers are indignant that these costs are being passed on to them by a company that expects to earn $16 billion this year. Throughout the 1990s workers' pay remained largely stagnant while company executives profited handsomely.

Currently, the IUE-CWA's contract expires in June, but it contains a clause that allows the company to unilaterally hike health care costs while the union retains the right to strike. Workers have already authorized strike action that would affect 48 GE plants at locations around the country.

**Negotiations fail at largest strikebound Hawaii hospital**

Contract talks between the largest of three Honolulu hospitals and the Hawaii Nurses Association broke off January 3 after an 18-hour negotiating session failed to bring a tentative agreement in the five-week-old strike.

While negotiators from The Queen's Medical Center and the union representing the hospital's 800 nurses made progress on reaching an agreement over retirement benefits, the two sides remain far apart on the main stumbling block of mandatory overtime, staffing levels and a proposal to substitute paid time-off for vacation and sick days.

Negotiations between the union and St. Francis Medical Center, where 340 nurses are manning picket lines, started up January 5 and another set of negotiations between Kuakini Medical center and 200 nurses were to resume January 6.

**More layoffs at United Airlines**

United Airlines announced another round of layoffs in its continuing policy of making workers pay for the company's bankruptcy. United says it will close 32 ticket offices around the country and lay off 188 hourly workers as well as 1,500 salaried and management employees.

The announcement came last week as the company implemented 686 layoffs at reservation offices in San Francisco, Long Beach and Indianapolis. In the next few weeks, 352 pilots, 2,700 flight attendants and 600 machinists will be laid off.

Last September the airline slashed 20,000 jobs in the first major round of job cutting. The airline now plans to cut costs by $2.4 billion a year in order to restore profitability. This is well above its original plan, which was rejected by the Bush administration's government board which denied the airline loan guarantees it needed to stay out of bankruptcy.

**Bush administration drops Labor Department's monthly layoff report**

With no letup in the mushrooming layoffs of American workers, the Bush administration cancelled the Labor Department's monthly report on mass layoffs, citing lack of funding. The department's Bureau of Labor Statistics normally files a report of instances of layoffs affecting 50 or more workers at workplaces across the nation.

The report was begun in 1984 as the administration of Ronald Reagan spearheaded a campaign of union-busting and wage-cutting. During the recession of the early 1990s, the first President Bush dropped the program, also claiming it lacked funds to continue the program. The Clinton administration revived the program in 1995.

The government agency issued its last report on Christmas Eve, noting that some 240,000 workers were laid off at 2,150 locations in November.

**Air Canada Centre workers strike**

More than 1,000 workers at Toronto's Air Canada Centre, the city's professional sports arena, have been on strike since January 4. The striking workers include part-time housekeepers, cooks, ticket takers, ushers, bartenders, concession workers, servers, and conversion and ice crews. The workers, who are represented by Teamsters Local 847, earn between (Can)$11 and $19 an hour.

In addition to wage increases, workers are demanding wage harmonization between part- and full-time workers. Part-time employees currently make only a fraction of the wages earned by full-time workers. Workers are also demanding that tips given to service workers be kept by the employees themselves rather than placed in the till as contributions to general revenue. Steve Stavros' Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, which owns the center, as well the Toronto Raptors and the Toronto Maple Leafs professional basketball and hockey teams, has offered wage increases of 4, 3 and 3 percent over the next three years, while refusing to entertain any change in the tipping policy.

The local union's vice president, Joelle Spadacini, told the *Toronto Star*: "We're not talking about a non-profit organization. We're talking about a company that allegedly made $75 million last year. When you leave a tip for a hot dog and drink, that goes into Steve Stavros' pocket."

**Air Canada and Air Transat attendants ratify collective agreement**

Eleven hundred flight attendants at Air Transat, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), ratified a new collective agreement December 29. Earlier in December, they had voted down a tentative agreement reached between the company and the union bargaining committee.

At Air Canada, 8,500 flight attendants ratified a new collective agreement December 30. The agreement provides for wage increases of 10 percent over 44 months. The new contract continues to divide flight attendants, who worked for the former Canadian Airlines International, from their fellow flight attendants, who worked for Air Canada before the merger. The contract includes a $25.8 million bonus limited to pre-merger Air Canada flight attendants.

In 1999, a pitched battle among various corporate cliques ended with Air Canada taking over Canadian Airlines the following year. Throughout the corporate infighting, the unions encouraged airline workers to back their "own" corporation, rather than struggle against their common opponent.

**Skeena Cellulose (BC Mill) workers reject concessions contract**

In the Hazeltons, in northwestern British Columbia, approximately 100 workers at a mill owned by Skeena Cellulose have rejected a contract offer that would have seen them take wage concessions in exchange for a promise to open to reopen the mill, which has been shut for two years. Despite a recommendation by union leaders that they ratify the offer 51.5 percent of the workers voted to reject the deal.

The company, which has received $400 million in various forms of loans from the province, was bought by NWBC Timber and Pulp Ltd. in April 2002. In August, Skeena President Dan Veniez threatened that none of Skeena's various mills in northern BC would re-open unless workers accepted wage cuts.