

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 January 2003

Transit strike in Uruguay

On January 7 transit workers in Montevideo, including both bus and taxi drivers, went on strike over higher wages. Officials from the Broad Front coalition that runs Montevideo have been criticized for voting for a 17 percent wage increase for the legislature, while transit workers living standards continue to stagnate.

The pay increase for legislators resulted in protests across Uruguay. "It's like Robin Hood in reverse," declared transit leader Daniel Garcia. Uruguay is in the middle of a severe economic slump. The Union of Transit Employees (UNOTT) warned that the conflict will expand until the city addresses workers' wage demands.

Unemployed confront police in southern Chile

Members of the Unemployed Committees of Lota, on the south-central coast of Chile, confronted police and blocked the road to the city of Concepcion to protest the cancellation of 50 emergency work programs offered by the municipality. One worker was arrested and two police were injured in the protest.

Ten wounded in union protest in Haiti

Hospitals in Port-Au-Prince confirm that 15 people were wounded in confrontations between union protesters and a club-wielding goon squad made up of supporters of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, near the US Embassy. At least one person was hit by a bullet, possibly from the police.

Organized by public transportation drivers unions, other unions and a coalition of opposition political parties, last Friday's protest march followed a national strike that paralyzed the country last Tuesday.

The demonstration was over the price of fuel. Fuel increases in Haiti on January 1 caused immediate increases in the price of almost everything that workers buy. Several union members were arrested.

Bolivian bus owner-operators walk out

On January 8 a protest transit strike was organized by the Bus Drivers Confederation (CC), which represents bus owner-operators, against a doubling of insurance rates. The drivers of more than 30,000 vehicles participated in the 24-hour strike across Bolivia. The CC is considering a 48-hour strike this week if its demands are not addressed. Negotiations are ongoing with insurance firms, but no deal has been reached. The insurers accuse the industry of not taking measures to control the rising rate of accidents that result in passenger injuries each year.

Street vendors protest in Buenos Aires

Since January 7 street vendors on Buenos Aires downtown commercial promenade, Florida Street, have carried out protests against rules the government is now enforcing making their presence illegal.

On January 12, after being evicted from their place of business, hawkers were joined by the movement of the unemployed and by protesting bank depositors in setting up a picket line that blocked Corrientes Street, one of the city's major arteries.

As had happened throughout the week, the vendors were evicted by

mid-morning by a squad of police. They regrouped to discuss the incident and were joined by members of the unemployed movement (MST) and set up a picket line in the afternoon.

The protest led to a minor confrontation with the police. The street hawkers have vowed to continue fighting for their right to sell their wares on the formerly swanky promenade.

With an official unemployment of 18 percent, there has been an explosion of street vendors in Buenos Aires as workers seek alternative means to survive. The city decided to enforce rules against the outdoor sellers under pressure from businesses in the area, which are threatening not to pay taxes unless the police eliminate their competition.

Argentine unemployed protest against International Monetary Fund

On January 10, representatives of organizations of the unemployed rallied at the Sheraton Hotel in Buenos Aires to protest the imminent austerity agreement between the Duhalde government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the conclusion of the rally the groups divided into columns that marched on the Labor Ministry and the Secretariat of Social Welfare.

The protesters are demanding Duhalde repudiate the agreement with the IMF, which is thought to virtually embargo Argentine dollar reserves for the payment of foreign debt, leaving nothing for much needed imports. In addition, the protesters demanded jobs and an expansion of health and education services.

Two days earlier, the Unemployed Movement (MST) had set up picket lines throughout the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, blocking the movement of traffic. This was part of a national day of protest, which included picket lines in the industrial Provinces of Cordoba and Santa Fe and in the mineral producing provinces of Neuquen, Salta and Santiago del Estero.

The protests denounced the government's delay in paying unemployed benefits to workers that have already been approved. In Buenos Aires alone, 70,000 workers who were approved to receive benefits are still waiting.

MST spokesperson Juan Bonatto declared: "The government is forcing us to take harder measures because our situation is truly pressing. We will not permit our children to get sick because there is no food on the table."

GE workers to stage 48-hour strike

General Electric workers at 48 workplaces across the United States were set to launch a 48-hour strike starting 11:30 p.m. January 13 to protest the company's decision to raise out-of-pocket health care expenses by an average \$400 per year.

The United Electrical Workers (UE), with 5,000 GE members, and the International Union of Electrical-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA), which represents another 14,000 workers, charge that the policy, implemented January 1, has affected nearly 145,000 GE workers along with retirees on fixed incomes. "GE is

pushing between \$47 million and \$53 million in costs onto retirees and working families,” said Mark Mueller of IUE-CWA Local 1004. “They are doing this at a time when the company is one of the most profitable in America.” GE earned \$16 billion during 2002.

The walkout will be the first national strike at GE since 1969. But GE officials seemed unconcerned, pointing out that the unionized component of their US workforce comprises a mere 6 percent out of a global workforce of 310,000.

Judge imposes pay cuts on United Airlines machinists

A bankruptcy judge imposed 14 percent temporary pay cuts on some 35,000 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) January 10. The IAM bureaucracy has had difficulty in pushing through wage cuts against the mechanics, who voted down a proposal brought to them by the union leadership shortly before the nation’s number two airline declared bankruptcy. In the face of growing opposition to the wage-cutting deal accepted by the airline’s other unions, United turned to Judge Eugene Wedoff to slash the mechanics’ pay.

Added to concessions by four other unions at United, the total in interim cuts will amount to \$70 million a month. The wage cuts are largely to stabilize the financial position of the company and pay off four lenders that provided \$1.5 billion in debtor-in-possession financing.

United will seek another \$2 billion in concessions each year through 2008. CEO Glenn Tilton responded to the court action, saying, “Now that we have received court approval to take the immediate steps necessary to stabilize our cost structure, we can devote our attention to working with our unions on the longer-term imperatives currently facing the company.” The IAM made no comment in the wake of the court’s decision.

Largest Hawaii hospital reaches tentative agreement

The largest of three strikebound Honolulu hospitals reached a tentative agreement with the Hawaiian Nurses Association after six weeks on strike. The three-year contract offers a 21 percent pay increase, retiree benefits and limited restrictions on mandatory overtime.

The nurses’ union is said to have largely surrendered to hospital management on the controversial issue of eliminating sick days and substituting a plan that offers paid time-off to those nurses who maintain good attendance records. Nurses charge that such a proposal punishes them when they use sick days and vacation days for illnesses contracted from patients or as a result of long hours due to understaffing. Nurses are expected to hold a ratification vote within a week.

Airlines lobby for new act to govern transportation labor relations

Representatives from the Air Transport Association, which represents corporate management at the nation’s largest airline carriers, appeared before Congress last week to lobby for a rewriting of the 1926 Railway Labor Act to make it more difficult for unions to strike.

Industry lobbyists want new legislation that will curb any form of industrial action by workers and thereby make it easier to undermine working conditions and obtain wage cuts and other concessions.

Last year Republican Senator John McCain from Arizona attempted to implement new legislation that would have utilized a panel of arbitrators to quickly impose contract conditions. With Republicans in control of the Senate, McCain chairs that body’s Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Strike ends at Air Canada Centre

The strike by 1,100 workers at the main convention and entertainment center in downtown Toronto ended January 9 pending the outcome of a strike vote held over the weekend. The strike by part-time employees began on January 4 and included housekeepers, cooks, ticket takers, ushers, bartenders, concession workers, servers, and conversion and ice crews. The company had used management and scab labor during the strike to prevent interruption of scheduled professional hockey and basketball events.

The three-year deal, which was recommended by the union leadership, allows workers to keep tips, which had previously gone into general revenue, but provides for wage increases of only 10 percent over the term of the contract. That was management’s original wage offer, which workers had previously rejected.

The strikers, represented by Teamsters Local 847, are mostly low-wage workers, earning between \$11 and \$19 an hour. Workers had been seeking far greater increases in wages and benefits to bring them in line with full-time employees.

Essential workers in Montreal to strike

The union representing 1,100 essential service workers in Montreal has obtained permission from the Quebec Essential Services Council to begin limited strike action beginning this week in Montreal.

The Syndicat des fonctionnaires municipaux, a union affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees, presented a list of workers it was requesting be deemed essential to the council in strike action set to begin January 13. The ruling provides that no more than 3 out of 21 welfare offices staffed by workers be allowed to close in the course of what is planned as a three-week action. Those offices will continue to provide fire and evacuation services and the public must be informed of any closures ahead of time.

The action is being taken to prevent anticipated job losses arising from the end of a 30-year deal with the city of Montreal to administer welfare services. The provincial government is set to take over that responsibility at the end of March and is expected to quickly move to eliminate jobs in welfare service.

Talks resume in Vidéotron strike

Bargaining between the union representing 2,200 striking workers and the giant broadcaster Vidéotron resumed last week after a two-week interruption. The bitter dispute is now in its tenth month and has centered on the replacement of 650 technicians resulting from the sale of the company’s installation and maintenance wing.

Vidéotron is the largest cable and Internet provider in the province and is owned by media and publishing giant Quebecor. The workers were locked out after voting to strike last May and have been without a contract since the end of 2001. The company has used every means at its disposal, including the use of scab labor, to impose job cuts and \$50 million in concessions. The strikers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which has been negotiating through a mediator with a company team headed by former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard.



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