

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 January 2003

## **Bolivian police breaks up retirees' march**

On January 15 police forced thousands of retirees participating in a protest march between the cities of La Paz and Oruro to return to their towns. Marchers were forced to get on buses. One of the buses had an accident. As a result 11 workers died, and 63 others were injured.

The police ambushed the marchers as they rested, about 60 kilometers south of La Paz, and forced them onto the buses. The retirees had been on the road for six days when the police assaulted them. Many of the mostly poor retirees began the march back to La Paz, once they were released from the buses.

The retirees oppose abrogation of a law that indexes pensions to the US dollar. So far this year the Bolivian peso has lost eight percent in value, automatically raising their monthly stipend. Had the pensions been indexed to inflation, they would have only risen by two percent.

## **Rio de Janeiro public employees on strike**

Public employees of Rio de Janeiro State went on strike January 16 to demand payment of two months' back wages. In addition, the workers are demanding that Governor Rosinha Matheus respect the pay schedule from now on. Matheus blames the previous Workers Party administration for the state's financial crisis. Four hundred thousand employees have yet to be paid for November and December 2002.

## **Verizon suspends over 600 workers**

Verizon Communications temporarily suspended 607 New York workers who declined to cross informational picket lines in the wake of the company's layoff of 2,352 employees last month. Within days of the December layoffs, Verizon workers were further provoked when the company ordered thousands of repair technicians to work mandatory overtime.

The company issued suspensions to 200 workers in Suffolk County, Long Island and 350 in Queens, with the remainder of suspensions centered in Brooklyn. The layoffs range from a half day to 20 days. According to the company the lengthier layoffs were imposed on workers with previous infractions.

The Communications Workers of America, which represents some 19,000 Verizon workers in New York, has filed grievances over the issue. But the union has been ineffective in opposing layoffs. In the current labor negotiations, Verizon is only offering to forego layoffs if workers accept pay freezes, a reduction of hours, a loss of sick pay and overtime and increased payments for medical insurance.

A Verizon spokesman raised questions over a spate of vandalism against the company's telephone cables claiming those who cut lines in New York and New Jersey appeared to "have knowledge" of the companies communication infrastructure. In New Jersey, where Verizon workers are represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the union has taken its dispute over layoffs to state regulators, trying to make a case that the company is not able to properly serve its customers.

## **Contract ratified at Domino Sugar**

Workers at Domino Sugar's Baltimore plant ratified a new three-year contract by a 269 to 22 margin. Union officials attributed the ratification margin to management's decision to back off a proposal to merge the pension plan for the Baltimore workers into a plan covering workers at other Domino plants in the US.

Workers originally voted by a 263 to 3 margin to strike the plant on December 8 after the United Food and Commercial Workers Union claimed that Domino would not provide sufficient details about the pension merger. While pensions did not change, the new agreement did cut two paid holidays and conceded the company the right to new flexible work rules that will lead to job elimination. All early retirement options were eliminated and workers will contribute to health care costs for the first time, paying \$40 per month.

## **Bush official orders end to unionization of airport screeners**

The head of the Transportation Security Administration, Admiral James Loy, issued an order barring the unionization of the 56,000 federal airport screeners. Loy

declared that collective bargaining was “not compatible” with the Bush administrations so-called war on terrorism.

Screeners at airports in New York, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh and Chicago had begun petitioning the Federal Labor Relations Authority to allow unionization under the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE).

A spokesman for AFGE responded to the attack, saying, “Admiral Loy surely knows that the administration already has the flexibility to suspend collective bargaining during a true national emergency. The Bush administration has shown once again that the war it cares about most is the one it is waging against the US government work force.”

### **New York sweatshop rehires fired linen workers**

A New York linen service has submitted to an NLRB decision by agreeing to rehire two immigrant workers and pay back pay to halt a boycott campaign at upper-class restaurants by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE).

Two female Hispanic workers were fired after accusing Linens of Europe of paying them \$4 an hour and declaring they wanted a union. The company agreed to pay the workers a total of \$8,000 in back pay, but denied it violated the \$5.15 minimum wage standard. Rocio Castelan, one of the fired workers, labored from 7:30 am to 7:00 pm Monday through Friday and 7:30 am to 5:30 pm on Saturdays receiving \$530 in cash every two weeks. The company compelled her to sign receipts stating she was being paid \$600. Linens of Europe also agreed to end interference with UNITE’s campaign to unionize the company’s 12 workers. UNITE carried out a year-long campaign that included appeals to restaurants to drop Linens of Europe as their supplier.

### **Massachusetts county sheriff wants prisoners to replace laid-off state employees**

Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson proposed using inmate labor work crews to replace state workers who will be axed as a result of a projected \$450-\$600 million budget shortfall in Massachusetts. Some 1,100 inmates are housed in Bristol County facilities under the Sheriff’s Department and about 150 are eligible for work programs.

Towns in the county such as Dartmouth could lose 10 percent of their state aid under a plan by Governor Mitt Romney to bridge the state’s budget deficit. Sheriff Hodgson sees the use of prison labor as an efficient use of state resources. “There’s a lot of creative things we could be doing,” he declared.

### **Canada**

### **University of British Columbia teaching assistants**

### **protest tuition increase**

On January 16 teaching assistants at the University of British Columbia staged a protest outside the home of the university’s president to oppose a wage freeze accompanied by a \$500 per year increase to tuition. They also demanded that the university cease its attempt to strip workers of their health benefits.

In December the teaching assistants, represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2278, had voted 87 percent in favor of a walkout. The university had refused to renew a policy that provided a rebate of 50 percent of any tuition increase faced by teaching assistants. The tuition hike—the first in 10 years—translates into a pay cut of 16 percent for the university’s teaching assistants.

Meanwhile, teaching assistants at Carleton University in Ottawa reached a settlement with the university, granting the teaching assistants a rebate of any tuition increases. The two-year agreement also included wage increases of 3 percent and 2 percent. Teaching assistants at Hamilton’s McMaster University voted to give the union a strike mandate. They are demanding wage increases, a rebate of tuition increases, and the provision of funding for fifth-year doctoral students.

### **Settlement in Nelson civic workers’ strike**

On January 13, 80 municipal workers employed by the city of Nelson, British Columbia ratified a two-year deal. Their main demands were that the maintenance of job security provisions and sick leave benefits. The workers, who had been without a contract for just over a year, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

The union claims that their main demands were achieved with “no concessions,” only in the same breath to acknowledge a series of concessions—no retroactive wage increase in 2002, a paltry 2.5 percent wage increase in 2003, and a two-year rather than three-year contract. In the words of union president Bev Lapointe: “We wanted to do our part to help the city through these tough times.”



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