

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 January 2003

Guatemalan teachers strike

Guatemalan teachers went on strike January 20, the first day of school for hundreds of thousands of the nation's students. Thousands of striking teachers mobilized in street rallies and teachers' barricades blocked important highway junctions. Hundreds of teachers assembled at a school where President Alfonso Portillo led a ceremony opening the school year. While Portillo acknowledged that teachers are badly paid, he said there is no money for raises. Teachers also protested in front of the presidential and legislative buildings.

Guatemala has 80,000 teachers who are paid between \$200 and \$400 a month. They are demanding a 60 percent increase, better working conditions and more money for schools. On January 24 the government offered a \$12 increase. In response, the teachers decided to continue striking and protesting this week.

Uruguay transit strike

Montevideo transit workers staged a surprise strike on the afternoon of January 20. The strike was over wages and was the third transit strike this year. Fares were raised by 10 percent on January 2. Transit workers point out prices for basic necessities are increasing and are demanding that their wages be increased as well.

On January 19 unions, housing cooperatives and left-leaning parties organized a march to Punta del Este, a beach community where wealthy Uruguayans and tourists congregate. The march paralyzed the community. Police arrested 169 protesters.

Rio de Janeiro utility workers threaten strike

Utility workers in Brazil's second largest city threatened to walk out after negotiations collapsed between the Light Company, Rio de Janeiro's electric utility, and its workers over a job security clause in the workers' contract. The utility workers unions are demanding the Light Company give up its plan to lay off 700 of the company's 4,000 employees.

Last December, Light employees went on strike over this same issue. The strike was suspended pending negotiations with the utility. The utility insists it is going through a "delicate" period that makes the layoffs necessary and can only offer limited job security of 18 months. It also promised to create 400 new jobs, giving laid-off workers preference. The union accused the Light Company of halving the workforce since the utility was privatized in 1998.

Colombian agricultural workers under attack by fascist militia

Agricultural workers are being targeted for assassination or arrest all across Colombia by death squads linked to the army. The general secretary of the National United Agricultural Workers Union (FENSUAGRO), Nicolas Hernandez, was recently the target of a failed assassination attempt.

A communiqué from the union reported the January 21 murder of Abelardo Barbosa Paez, a worker at the Puerto Wilches Palm and Oil Products Company, Santander. Armed men shot Paez several times as he was riding his motorcycle home from work. The union says paramilitaries have been operating in the region for several years with the complicity of the government.

According a regional analyst for the public defender's office in Huila, around 16 people, including campesinos and small traders from the municipality of San Jose de Isnos, Huila department, were killed during

the months of November and December 2002 by paramilitary groups. In addition, in the Don Gabriel area, Morroa municipality, Sucre, the leader of the Sucre Small and Medium Agricultural Workers Union (SINDAGRICULTORES), the daughter of the president of the trade union, and the secretary of the Colombian Communist Party, Jorge Gomez, were detained.

Mexican workers protest

Workers of a bankrupt furniture factory partially owned by the state's Secretary of Economic Development, Antonio Zarain, heckled Puebla State Governor Melquiades Morales in the city of Atlixco. Workers carried signs reading, "Zarain, you betrayed us!" The company declared bankruptcy in 1999.

The firm, Segusino, owes \$4 million to the banks, \$1.7 million to vendors and more than \$500,000 to its workers. Workers pointed out the irony that the person in charge of creating jobs in Puebla is responsible for the destruction of jobs in his own company.

Segusino's bankruptcy was part of a wave of furniture factory closures. Scores of companies shut down due to competition by higher quality and lower priced imported furniture. The company locked out the workers on January 7. When workers returned from the holidays, 300 found themselves without work.

Workers, members of the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Farmers (CROC), said they are owed for year-end bonuses, education subsidies for their children, vacation pay, and for union dues deducted from workers' pay but never paid to the union.

The workers have blocked the entrance to the plant. Zarain claims he is not responsible for what happened at the plant, falsely claiming that he is merely a "shareholder." He called on the workers to allow access to the factory, so that its equipment could be auctioned off. In return he promised workers would be paid.

Mexican labor leader shot down

On January 24, Silvestre Martinez, a leader of Mexico's telephone workers union, was shot in Monterrey. He has been hospitalized in critical condition. Monterrey workers reacted by going on strike indefinitely. While telephone service still operates, no new connections, repairs or long distance service will be available during the strike. Martinez, 41, had been attacked twice before in November 2002.

Argentine unemployed demand government benefits

On January 23, 5,000 unemployed workers braved torrential rains in a two-day march from Buenos Aires Province into downtown Buenos Aires. The workers are demanding an expansion and prompt payment of welfare benefits to the unemployed. If their demands are not addressed they vowed to barricade highways across Argentina. Currently, heads of household receive about \$50 a month. The unemployed are demanding the amount be doubled.

On January 24, protesters were joined by thousands of others and reached the Labor Ministry. The workers denounced the disappearance of 210,000 benefit packages, which were distributed among the leading candidates of the Peronist Party for the purposes of patronage. In addition, the workers demanded the government initiate emergency job creation measures.

The marchers demanded speedy approval and implementation of new

welfare plans for at least the 10,000 applicants—approved in November—who have yet to see their first check.

Along the route of the march, people applauded the protesters and donated provisions. On the second day of the march, the protesters passed in front of the Venezuelan and United States embassies, where they called for support for Venezuelan President Chavez and denounced US plans to attack Iraq. Other demonstrations took place in the provinces of Tucuman and Cordoba. In Tucuman, 1,300 workers were attacked by police, who used tear gas and rubber bullets against the marchers.

Union charges government agency with negligence in 2001 Alabama mine disaster

The United Mine Workers union charged in an independent 100-page report last week that the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) failed to force management to fix safety problems in an Alabama mine, leading to the nation's deadliest mining disaster since 1984.

On September 23, 2001, two explosions erupted in Blue Creek No. 5 mine, killing 13 Alabama miners. Last month MSHA blamed the deaths on negligence and cited the company, Jim Walter Resources, for safety violations. But it did not address its own role in the incident, which is being considered in an internal review not yet made public.

The UMWA claims the government agency not only failed to address problems that had been in existence since the latter part of the 1990s, but collaborated with management by training its workers to keep two sets of books on the mine. One set held an accurate record of conditions while a second carried more limited information on workplace hazards.

UMWA Safety & Health Administrator Joe Main, who led the investigation, declared, "MSHA's District 11 allowed many violations to languish well after the required abatement dates had passed and kept fines low by, for example, citing that only one miner would be injured or killed by most violations."

Airline lobbyists step up pressure to outlaw strikes

Lobbyists for the major airlines, backed by the US Chamber of Commerce, Business Roundtable and other business groups, are pressing hard to get a major revision of the airline labor code. The new legislation calls for the declaration of an emergency and the imposition of a panel of arbitrators by the transportation secretary when labor negotiations break down. The panel's recommendation would be binding.

That the results of such an intervention will rebound to the benefit of the corporations is a foregone conclusion. "We need to examine the labor code. We do think it needs to be changed for the long-term health of the industry," American Airlines CEO Don Carty told a Senate hearing. Airline interests believe the climate of mass layoffs, bankruptcies and an unabashed pro-business president in the White House are the best conditions for a revision of the code that will strip airline workers of the right to strike. Republicans control the executive and legislative branches and strong pro-airline management advocates such as Senator John McCain, heading the Senate Commerce Committee, and Senator Trent Lott are in charge of the aviation subcommittee.

Teamsters drivers begin vote on strike authorization

The Teamsters union has begun canvassing 65,000 truck drivers for strike authorization after contract talks with four trucking companies for a new master freight agreement broke down over wages and health care.

The four trucking companies—Roadway, Yellow, Arkansas Best and US Freight-ways—are demanding drivers for the first time pay a portion of health care costs. Management is also proposing a wage package that offers a \$750 bonus in the first year and a 35 cent annual wage increase in the subsequent years of the five-year agreement. The Teamsters are asking for yearly wage increases of 60 to 70 cents.

Union officials will announce the results of the strike authorization ballot by February 3. The present five-year agreement expires March 31. Besides the master freight agreement, the Teamsters represent another 20,000 drivers at smaller firms who traditionally have adopted similar

agreements. Decades of betrayed strikes and collaboration with the trucking bosses by the Teamsters bureaucracy have left the vast majority of the industry unorganized.

California nurses strike into third month

Bay Area nurses at Doctors Medical Center San Pablo/Pinole continue to walk the picket line in their strike to demand a pension plan. Tenet Healthcare Corporation, which owns the strikebound hospital, is adamant in its resistance to the pension proposal. None of its other 113 hospitals across the nation provide employee pensions.

Nurses at all other Bay Area hospitals represented by the California Nurses Associations have pensions, and at this point neither the striking nurses nor Tenet have given any indication of weakening their position. Some 75 percent of striking nurses have found other jobs in order to endure the long strike. Meanwhile, Tenet continues to bring in replacement nurses from across the country to continue operations.

No discussions between management and the union have been held since October. Nurses are asking Tenet to substitute the pension for the present 401(k) retirement plan that includes a 5 percent match by the company.

Last of three Hawaii hospitals settle nurses strike

The 340 nurses at the St. Francis Medical Center in Honolulu ratified a tentative agreement January 19, ending the strike wave that at its height included 1,400 nurses at three hospitals.

The St. Francis nurses obtained an 18 percent wage increase that spans a three-year contract in increments of 4 percent, 6 percent and 8 percent. The hospital, the most financially troubled of the three struck hospitals, had wanted a one-year agreement.

Another 200 nurses at the Kuakini hospital ratified their agreement January 10. The deal called for a 20 percent wage increase over three years. Queen's Medical Center, Hawaii's largest hospital with 800 nurses, saw its three-year agreement calling for a 21 percent wage increase ratified on January 16.

Newspaper Guild launches second byline strike at AP

For the second time this month, the Newspaper Guild-Communications Workers of America launched a byline strike at the Associated Press. On January 23 and 24 reporters withheld their names from stories to protest the AP's demand that worker pay as much as 40 percent in increased health insurance premiums.

The AP is also angling to reduce job security provisions. The AP has resisted Guild demands to extend domestic partner benefits to its members. The contract between the Guild and the AP expired on November 30, 2002 but the provisions of the old agreement have been extended until a new agreement is in place.

Ottawa transit workers reject offer

Ottawa's 1,900 OC Transpo transit workers could be on strike as early as January 29, after a vote rejecting the capital city's latest offer was held January 21. The workers, represented by Local 279 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, are demanding 4 percent wage increases in each of the next three years. The rejected offer provided for wage increases of only 2½ percent, 3 percent and 3 percent in each of the next three years. An Ottawa city bus driver typically earns a wage of (Can)\$20.29 per hour.

The workers are also demanding the city halt the contracting out of five newly created rural express routes to private companies, and are seeking improvements to benefits, job protection, and insurance protection. Their previous contract expired in April 2002. In November 2002, the transit workers voted 97 percent in favor of strike action.

Durham teachers work-to-rule

Twenty-four hundred public elementary school teachers in Ontario's Durham region are engaging in a work-to-rule action in support of their demands for wage increases and increased preparation time. The teachers have refused to conduct field trips, staff meetings or meetings with parents, as well as refusing some report card tasks.

In December 2002, the teachers, represented by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, voted 91.5 percent in favor of a strike mandate. Negotiations with a conciliator will resume January 29.

Nova Scotia nursing home negotiations break down

Talks have broken down in contract negotiations between nursing home workers and Queen's Manor in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. Negotiations are expected to set the standard for contract talks at 36 other nursing homes across the province. The workers' main demands are for improvements in staffing ratios, pension fairness, job security and wages. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, representing the workers, has asked for the appointment of a conciliator. The 3,000 nursing home workers have been 15 months without a contract.



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