Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 February 2003

Guatemala's striking teachers take over ministry, customs offices

Guatemalan teachers, now in the fourth week of their strike, occupied the Education Ministry and six customs offices on February 7 as part of their campaign to force the government to raise the education budget. Some 2,000 teachers occupied the ministry, while another 300 blocked the Ministry of Foreign Relations next door. Others occupied customs posts on the Mexican, Salvadoran and Honduran borders. Those offices were padlocked to prevent the movement of merchandise.

The Associated Press quoted Moises Fuentes, leader of the National Assembly of Teachers (ANM), saying, "The purpose of these acts is to force negotiations; otherwise the education minister will never address our demands."

So far, the government is treating the protests as a police matter, and is continuing the process of firing striking teachers.

Brazilian unions launch campaign for higher wages

On February 5, Forca Sindical (FS), a Brazilian union federation, launched a campaign to recover real-wage losses incurred by workers from November 2002 through January 2003. According to FS sources, workers' purchasing power has declined by more than 10 percent. FS leader Paulinho said workers who received a 10.26 percent raise in November have lost it all by now.

FS is demanding wage re-openers for 14 unions, including workers in the metal, chemical, construction, textile, food industries and transport. These unions represent 2.6 million workers. Paulinho declared that FS will seek a remedy in the labor courts but is ready for strike action as a measure of last resort.

On February 7 Brazilian treasury authorities confirmed that the newly-installed Lula administration will tighten the austerity policies of former President Fernando Cardoso to assure foreign creditors that debt payments will be the top priority of the new government. The government announced it intended to maintain a budget surplus of 4.25 percent, half a percentage point higher than that demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Together with a highly restrictive monetary policy by Brazil's central bank, this will contract the Brazilian economy, resulting in continuing attacks on wages and jobs.

Violent attack on Dominican anti-privatization protesters

Fifteen citizens were wounded in confrontations in Santo Domingo and other cities during protests that were part of a 24-hour strike February 4. The strike was organized by the Collective of Popular Organizations to pressure the government of Hipolito Mejia not to privatize electric utilities and to lower the costs of fuels and taxes on gasoline. Most of the casualties were the result of confrontations with police in Santo Domingo.

Bolivian newspaper strike

On February 3 reporters *Diaria* at the **La** Paz *Pre* strike over the politically motivated dismissal of an editor. Two days earlier a leader of the La Paz Press Workers Union (STPLP), Arsenio Alvarez, declared himself on hunger strike over the same incident. On February 6 five striking reporters also declared themselves on hunger strike.

The reporters are demanding the fired editor, Andres Gomez, be rehired and the newspaper owners agree to three years with no changes in editorship. Gomez, *La Prensa's* information chief, is the second media employee to be sacked. His dismissal followed that of a regional television news director. Both newsmen were opponents of the present regime The STPLP insists that both were fired as a result of political pressure on the media.

Protests continue in El Salvador over the privatization of health care

On February 6, striking public health doctors and their supporters marched in San Salvador to protest the privatization of El Salvador's Social Security public health care system and to demand that the government negotiate with doctors.

Over 10,000 protesters marched along with the 850 striking doctors through the city's commercial district and rallied at the offices of the Social Security administration. The week before the government had unilaterally declared an end to the strike. Workers and employees at public health clinics and hospitals are demanding reinstatement at their posts and payment of back wages. The government embargoed their salaries when the protests began last September.

Cananea copper miners return to work

Mexican copper miners at the Cananea mine returned to work February 6 after the owners—Grupo Mexico—agreed to a production bonus, according to union sources. More than 1,000 miners stopped work January 20. Grupo Mexico had threatened to shut the mine if the workers did return, but decided to come to a deal with the union under pressure from Mexican President Vicente Fox and the Labor Secretariat.

Teamsters reach tentative pact with trucking companies

The Teamsters union reached a tentative agreement February 6 with the largest trucking companies covering 65,000 drivers, dock workers and office personnel, under the so-called National Master Freight Agreement. The contract between the Teamsters and Yellow Corporation, US Freightways, Roadway and Arkansas Best calls for an 11.3 percent wage increase over the life of a five-year contract. In terms of actual dollars, the wage increases will be \$2.25 an hour on top of the present average wage of \$19.90 per hour.

Pension contributions will be raised by 60 cents per year for the first four years and 70 cents in the final year. An additional week of vacation will be given to workers with over 30 years of seniority. The agreement also calls for a cost-of-living agreement, but the formula provides a meager one cent per hour for every .2 increase in the Consumer Price Index above 3 percent.

The agreement also includes a clause that bars trucking companies from subcontracting to lower-wage Mexican operators when the border is opened for freight hauling from Mexico into the United States. The union has been conducting a chauvinist campaign to ban Mexican truckers from entering the US under provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Teamsters members covered by the Master Freight Agreement, along with another 20,000 union truck drivers at smaller companies whose contracts mirror that agreement, represent a mere 2 percent of all US truckers.

Workers strike Kentucky uranium plant

Some 620 workers at a Uranium-enrichment plant in Paducah, Kentucky walked out on strike February 4 after voting by a 97 percent margin to reject a contract with the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC). The company’s five-year contract offered wage increases of 1.7 percent in the first year followed by subsequent raises of 3 and 3.3 percent in each of the remaining four years. The company is also insisting on raising health insurance premiums from 10 percent to 12 percent in the first year with a jump to 19 percent in the last year of the contract. New hires would face an immediate 19 percent charge.

Members of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) union want a contract similar to the agreement obtained by workers at the Miamisburg, Ohio nuclear plant where a four-year agreement resulted in annual wage increases of 3.5 percent, a 10 percent pension hike and a 10 percent cap on employees share of health insurance costs.

Workers are also galled by the fact that USEC’s managers rake in six-digit salaries, topped by CEO William Timbers who made $2.5 million in salary, bonuses and stock options. PACE President Leon Owens charged that managers make one-time lump-sum bonuses equivalent to what a worker makes during the course of an entire year.

New talks in Nevada strike

Negotiators for Rinker Hydro Conduit in Henderson, Nevada and Teamsters Local 631 officials resumed negotiations February 10 as the strike by 60 industrial workers entered its fourth week. When union and company officials met the previous week the company reduced its financial offer. That proposal called for a 25-cent raise in each year of a four-year agreement. A maintenance-of-benefits offer on the health care package would by the end of the fourth year require workers to pay between $100 and $140 per month.

The strike initially shut down operations of the multimillion-dollar company, but management has since resumed production with replacement production workers and truckers to move out product that had been completed before the strike began.

American Airlines demands workers sacrifice in wake of record loss

American Airlines appealed last week for the collaboration of its airline union leaders to aid in cutting $1.8 billion in wages, benefits and work rules. The decision was revealed in letters from Don Carty, CEO of the airline’s parent company AMR and its president, Gerard Arpey, after a meeting with pilot, flight attendant and machinists union officials.

The move came just as AMR announced a $3.5 billion loss for 2002, the largest in aviation history. The cuts are presumably only a preliminary step to avoid immediate bankruptcy. The airline claims it needs an estimated $4 billion in permanent annual savings in order to restore profitability.

The company already has plans to close two of its ten domestic reservations offices, one located Norfolk, Virginia and the other in Las Vegas, with the loss of 910 reservations representatives. The company also says it will freeze pay for management while laying off 22 percent of management personnel.

Toronto teachers set for job action

Eleven thousand teachers in the Toronto district school board could begin a work-to-rule campaign this week if a contract settlement is not reached by Wednesday, February 13. The limited action would join a parallel campaign at the nearby Durham board and is being taken amid ongoing contract talks following a vote last week overwhelmingly in favor of strike action.

Teachers at the Toronto board are represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and have been without a contract since last August. The union is demanding wage increases of over 4 percent a year while the latest offer from the board amounts to no more than 2 percent a year.

The action at the Toronto board presages similar moves by teachers across the province who are in a new round of contract battles with school boards hobbled by budget cuts imposed by the provincial Conservative government. Notwithstanding the promise of new money from the government, within the coming weeks as many as 20 other boards could join the Toronto and Durham boards in similar action.

Firings threatened in Ontario hospital strike

Workers who are set to take part in a one-day hospitals strike February 13 have been threatened with losing their jobs or other punishment in a letter sent out last week by some employers. Over 5,000 technicians, therapists and laboratory workers at over 40 hospitals across the province are to take part in the “day of action” to protest staff shortages and overwork.

The letter warning of “discipline up to and including dismissal” was sent from Toronto Medical Laboratories to its employees who belong the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), citing essential service provisions which make it illegal for them to strike. Hospital workers, 40 percent of whom are part-time, have said they would stage the strike to demonstrate their disapproval with stalled contract talks but their union has indicated that essential services would be maintained.