Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 February 2003

Brazilian public servants protest

About 4,000 striking State of Rio de Janeiro public employees protested across from Guanabara Palace February 13. The workers are demanding payment for their thirteenth salary (the traditional year-end bonus) for 2002 and that the government pay salaries on time. The striking workers confronted a goon squad of 300 sent by Governor Rosinha Matheus (PSB—Brazilian Socialist Party). The goons attempted to block the path of the protest, until the military police separated both parties.

The confrontation continued with two sound trucks playing loud music with political messages and occasional exchanges of blows.

The public workers say that 80 percent of the workforce is on strike. State officials claim that since Ms. Matheus only took power 40 days ago, the new government cannot be liable for back pay. Government Secretary Jaime Cardoso called the strike "partial and absurd" and threatened to impose financial sanctions on the workers unless they returned to work.

Guatemalan teachers defy government threats

Striking teachers in Guatemala continued massive protests February 13, openly defying government threats to freeze their wages and fire those who do not return to their classrooms.

Teachers from all over the country rallied in the capital to demand that the government double their salaries, increase the budget for education and feed poor students.

Moises Fuentes, leader of the teachers, declared, "We will continue the strike and protests until we obtain concrete answers from the government. We also demand that it stop threatening us."

Columns of teachers entered Guatemala City shouting anti-government slogans, with many students and parents joining the striking teachers. Meanwhile, other teachers continued the occupation of border posts between Guatemala and Mexico. Of Guatemala's 80,000 teachers, 60,000 have been on strike for a month. Their monthly pay varies between $190 and $390.

Argentine auto workers protest

On February 14, Renault workers in Argentina's second largest city, Cordoba, decided to fight against the company's layoff of 356 workers and the temporary suspension of 610 others. The workers met in an assembly and voted to resist the measure by protesting in Buenos Aires together with laid-off workers.

The sacked mechanics demanded that Renault postpone the measure for a year. Workers who are under suspension retain their jobs but are laid off for days or weeks at a time. The mechanics union (SMATA) demanded that workers under suspension be paid 450 pesos a month (about $120) and keep their benefits during the period of layoff. The workers assembly refused a Renault offer of 300 pesos a month. The workers gave the company a week to respond.

Both the Renault and Fiat plants are expected to continue the attack on jobs. Production at the plants is at 1959 levels.

Coors family subsidiary given small fine in wake of worker's death

The Michigan Department of Consumer and Industry Services ruled Graphic Packaging Corporation (GPC) violated two workers-safety violations related to insufficient employee training at its Kalamazoo plant. GPC, which is part of a chain of carton manufacturing facilities owned by the notoriously anti-union Coors family, was fined $2,250 for both infractions.

In November 2002, Jonathan Clark, a 30-year-old replacement worker, was killed when a 2,000 pound bale of cartons crushed him on a conveyer belt. GPC insisted Clark, who had worked at the plant less than a month, was properly trained and therefore responsible for his own death. Clark was hired through a temporary agency, Trillium Staffing, during a six-month lockout of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical, and Energy Workers (PACE) International Union.

The Department of Consumer and Industry Services waited until GPC had obtained union concessions involving mandatory overtime in January before issuing its slap on the wrist against the company. GPC was also fined an additional $1,800 for a third violation involving improper training for truck operators who were driving without proper permits.

Yale unions end contract extensions

Two Yale University unions representing 4,000 clerical and technical workers marched on the New Haven, Connecticut home of university President Richard Levin to deliver letters announcing they would no longer extend their labor contracts.

The previous labor agreements expired in January 2002 and last September rank-and-file members authorized strike action. But as long as the union agreed to contract extensions they were ineligible to strike. Yale management is insisting on a six-year pact with pay raises of 4 percent per year for Local 34 members and 3 percent for members of Local 35. The unions want a four-year pact with annual pay hikes of 9 percent for Local 34 and 6 percent for Local 35.

Those who marched on Levin's home carried signs demanding Yale address issues such as wages, pensions, job training and job security. They also called attention to Levin's $50,000 pay raise during 2000-2001. "I haven't gotten a raise in two years," a demonstrator told the Associated Press. "His salary is now $475,850 a year. I've been here five years and I don't make $30,000."

The canceling of contract extensions could mean strike action as early as March 1. Yale teacher assistants are also considering a strike during spring break to pursue their contract objectives.

New York City daycare workers hold one-day strike

Day care workers carried out a one-day strike and rallied in front of city hall to press their demands for a new contract last February 13. The 7,000 teachers, custodians and other employees work in 360 city-financed daycare centers servicing 50,000 children. They have been working without a new contract for more than two years, and their union, District Council 1707 is demanding a 4 percent annual pay raise for three years.

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The workers are also complaining that their wages and health-care plans are inferior to those with similar training, but who work directly for the city. They are seeking pay and benefits parity with these city employees. For example, they want certified daycare teachers whose starting salary is $34,000 to be paid the same as public school teachers, whose starting salary is $39,000. Many parents, although inconvenienced by the strike, have expressed their support for the protest.

The city is offering a 3 percent pay raise for one year and cash bonuses for the subsequent two years. In the past, the city offered daycare workers a wage package similar to that of city workers, whose most recent wage settlements averaged 4 percent a year. Faced with an immediate $3.5 billion budget deficit, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has decided to make a markedly inferior offer.

Indeed, the mayor has frequently said that for now on all city employees will obtain wage increases only to the extent that productivity savings will pay for them. The daycare workers rejected the last offer precisely because the city was demanding more in givebacks in vacation cuts and health-care benefits than it was offering in a raise. Union leaders have stated that if the city does not make a decent offer, the workers will engage in further job actions.

New York Teamsters strike against merger and job cuts

Some 65 Teamsters drivers on Long Island went on strike to oppose Kraft's intention to merge their routes dedicated to the delivery of Nabisco brand cookies into the company's delivery system. Kraft bought Nabisco in 2000 and the merger of routes would wipe out 50 percent of the jobs of Teamsters Local 550 drivers who deliver Nabisco products in New York City and surrounding suburbs.

Teamsters and unionized bakery workers at Nabisco operations throughout New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island are honoring the strike. The Stella D'Oro cookie bakery in the Bronx has been closed since the first day of the walkout. Kraft is using nonunion staff to deliver Nabisco products it presently has in stock.

Growing pressures on union-owned insurance company to divulge insider trading report

Federal investigators sued the labor-controlled insurance company Ullico Inc. last week seeking documents and a secret internal report detailing alleged insider-trading practices by CEO Robert Georgine and other union officials on the board who netted a total $6 million in a buy-back of company stock. In the course of the hearings Georgine was ordered by a US district judge to explain why he insists on keeping the documents secret.

Georgine ignored a January 3 subpoena by the Labor Department to produce documentation concerning his compensation, loans and stock transactions with Ullico. Georgine also sued to quash subpoenas from the Maryland Insurance Administration that is seeking documents. Meanwhile, the Justice Department and a federal grand jury are conducting their own investigations of Ullico's stock deals.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and other labor officials, allegedly not involved in the deal, have resigned from the board as the scandal threatens to explode. Two weeks ago the United Auto Workers, which owns more than 150,000 shares of Ullico stock, sued to get shareholder access to the secret report.

Ontario hospital workers stage one-day walkout

Medical technologists, pharmacists, social workers, lab technicians and other workers at 40 hospitals across Ontario staged a one-day walkout February 13. The 5,170 hospital workers, represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), and employed by the Ontario Hospital Association, have been without a contract for 10 months. The day of action was in support of their demands for better wages and working conditions (including staffing levels), as well as the establishment of a single arbitration process for the 40 hospitals.

A few days before, the Ontario Labour Relations board had ruled that the walkout would constitute illegal strike activity, which means that participants in the day of action could face fines of up to $2,000. The previous week workers received a letter warning of "discipline up to and including dismissal." The Ontario Hospital Association is now assembling a list of participants in advance of deciding whether to pursue legal action against the workers.

Workers at the Civic and General hospitals in Ottawa, not otherwise involved in the dispute, conducted lunch-hour sympathy demonstrations, as did workers at the hospital in Hawksbury, Ontario.

Strike at the University of British Columbia

Sixteen hundred teaching assistants, markers and instructors at the University of British Columbia went on strike February 11. Mediation between the workers, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2278, and the university administration, broke down February 7, when the administration refused to even discuss the main issue—tuition. As of Friday, however, the union, without public explanation, suspended picket lines and refusal of duties.

The university raised tuition by $500 last year, and the UBC board of governors recently approved a further 20 percent tuition increase for most graduate students. The workers staged a series of protests after the university's earlier offer which included no increase in wages. The university's most recent offer includes wage increases of 3, 2 and 2 percent over the next three years—but this does not nearly compensate for the effective 16 percent pay cut represented by the increase in tuition.

The Alma Mater Society (Student Union) closed its facilities while still paying its employees, in support of the striking teaching assistants. Meanwhile, the university's outside, food service and bookstore workers recently gave their union a strike mandate, and the university's clerical support staff is to hold a strike vote February 20.

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