Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 February 2003

Sao Paulo paralyzed by transit engineers strike

Over 2,000 transit engineers struck for 24 hours on February 21 in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo over wages and proposed layoffs. Transit engineers maintain traffic lights, remove incapacitated vehicles from the city's streets, and ticket unauthorized cars and trucks. As a result of the strike, gridlock conditions prevailed during the day in major arteries of the city.

Officials of the Union of Urban Transit Workers (SINDIVIARIOS) declared that workers have lost 22 percent of purchasing power this year and that city officials plan to sack about 155 workers by the month's end due to a budget cut of $8 million.

Jobless protest in Buenos Aires

On February 19, 20,000 unemployed workers marched in Buenos Aires to petition President Duahlde to double the unemployment subsidy—now set at 150 pesos. Columns of workers marched up the 9th of July Boulevard towards Argentina's Government House at the Plaza de Mayo. The march was blocked for over nine hours by police who demanded protesters give up their "sticks." Following tense negotiations a compromise was reached. The march was allowed to proceed to the Social Development Ministry, where the petition was delivered.

The demonstration was part of a national day of protest. In addition to demands for an increase and an extension of subsidies to non-heads of household and the creation of more jobs, protesters also demanded a more vigorous investigation into last year's police killings of Maximiliano Kosteki and Dario Santillan, two unemployed workers.

Argentine workers demand nationalization of railroads

On February 20 railroad workers and their supporters mobilized in Buenos Aires to demand that privatized railroads by re-nationalized. The protest also demanded the government rescind an emergency regulation, decreed by President Eduardo Duhalde, which allowed railroads to reduce service by 30 percent and cancel investment projects.

A spokesperson from the Buenos Aires section of the Railroad Union (UF) declared the "the rail system, privatized during the nineties, is in a state of chaos." The UF said it supports a nationalized system under joint control of workers and passengers. It also demands the reopening of closed lines.

Guatemalan teachers defy government

Thousands of striking teachers rallied February 22 in Guatemala City in defiance of a judicial order that made their five-week-old strike illegal. Guatemalan authorities latched on to the judicial decision to justify not paying their salaries for January and February. The teachers demand increases in the education budget to provide for raises and improvements in education. Sixty thousand teachers have been on strike since January 13.

Union leader denounces United Airlines workers opposed to concessions

International Association of Machinists District 141 President Randy Canale reprimanded workers opposed to the massive cuts being inflicted on the workforce at bankrupt United Airlines. In a letter posted on the union's web site, Canale stated, "The union has repeatedly reported that UAL must dramatically reduce its costs, including labor costs, in order to survive bankruptcy. Yet some members still fail to grasp this simple, obvious truth—we all must sacrifice, or UAL fails. Some may think that the necessary sacrifice should begin and end with someone else, but that is wishful thinking."

The attack on dissident workers was included in a statement in which Canale publicly backed United CEO Glenn Tilton's plan for UAL to launch a low-fare subsidiary. The most obvious impact of such a move would be to grant the company a weapon to further undermine and destroy the living standards of pilots and flight attendants. Canale declared the low-fare alternative "could prove to be the only viable alternative to a competitively irrelevant, shrinking UAL." District 141 represents 25,000 ramp and customer service employees at United. Another Machinists district, IAM District 141-M, represents the company's 12,000 mechanics.

Bankrupt US Airways seeks to raid pilots' pension fund

Attorneys for US Airways told a bankruptcy court judge last week that the airline is unable to meet funding requirements of the pension fund for its 4,000 pilots and therefore it should be allowed to terminate it and replace it with a cheaper plan. The defined benefit retirement plan is

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$2 billion under-funded and seen as an impediment by corporate management to their financial recovery.

Retirement Systems of Alabama, the lead US Airways investor, is withholding $200 million in emergency funding until the pilots' pension fund is replaced. The previous day US Airways defaulted on a $19.7 million payment to European aircraft manufacturer Airbus for five passenger planes in its first missed payment since declaring Chapter 11 bankruptcy back in August 2002.

The proposed change in the pension fund is expected to wipe out 75 percent of a pilots' annual retirement payments. Benefits for currently retired US Airways pilots average $36,000 a year. Pilots remaining on the job at US Airways have agreed to annual wage and benefit cuts totaling $646 million.

Pennsylvania nurses end strike

Nurses at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital approved a three-year contract and ended their strike over wages and working conditions. According to the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, the new agreement provides a 16 percent wage increase over the life of the contract, caps the cost of health insurance and does not implement the mandatory overtime proposal sought by the hospital's owner, Wyoming Valley Health Care System.

Resentment by nurses resulting from a decade of takeaways boiled over when the union first struck the hospital on January 30 for two days. Management retaliated by locking out nurses for an additional eight days. Nurses struck again on February 9 to make clear their demand for a resolution of the contract—especially the company's demand for mandatory overtime.

Strike closes Ontario truck plant

One thousand one hundred workers at the Sterling Truck's assembly plant in the southern Ontario town of St. Thomas walked off the job last week when first contract negotiations failed to yield a settlement before a strike deadline.

Sterling Trucks is a division of DaimlerChrysler AG and the workers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW). A key issue in the dispute arose over company attempts to introduce a new co-payment plan for worker benefits. Other outstanding issues include pensions and vacation pay, and in the area of wages, the union is seeking a 3 percent annual increase while the company is offering only 2.5 percent. Over 500 additional workers are currently on layoff at the 12-year-old plant, where a majority of workers voted to join the union last year.

St. Thomas is located about an hour east of Chatham, Ontario, where workers at the Navistar truck plant went on strike last summer in a bitter fight against a company attempt to bring in scab replacements. Sterling management has so far indicated it will not try to produce trucks during the strike.

More Ontario school boards join job action

In advance of possible strike action by up to 20 school boards across the province, educational workers at least eight more school boards joined a work-to-rule campaign last week that began the beginning of this year.

Teachers at Grand Erie, Hamilton-Wentworth, Keewatin-Patricia, Greater Essex, Simcoe, Upper Canada, Peel, Avon Maitland began limited job action this week as part of what is emerging as a province-wide battle against restrictive budgets handed down by the Tory government in Toronto. Many of the teachers involved have been without a contract since the beginning of the school year and most are currently in a legal strike position. The union leaderships of both the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) have indicated that they will only call a strike as a last resort.

BC truckers defy union in strike action

Over half of the 51 truckers hauling at the site of the new Mayfair shopping mall just east of Vancouver have withdrawn their services after their Teamsters local bowed to company demands for reduced rates.

Despite union refusal to sanction their action, over a dozen trucks lined the Lougheed Highway in the town of Pitt Meadows last week to protest. The truckers are owner-operators and are opposing what the union calls an "enabled rate" at the site, which cuts up to 20 percent from their pay. Truckers have said that the lower rate does not pay enough to keep their trucks fueled and running. The union says they must compete with the majority of independent truckers who are not unionized. Nonunion replacement truckers were brought in following the action, which the truckers say they plan to continue "for as long as it takes to try and get their message across to the company and others."

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