

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 March 2003

Honduran workers and students oppose privatization of water

On February 25, more than 1,000 workers and students blocked an important highway in Honduras to protest government plans to sell the Honduran public water utility to private industry. Bloque Popular, a coalition of left-wing political groups, organized the 12-hour protest.

Congress is considering a draft project that would hand over the national public utility to the cities, which would then place them in private hands. The International Monetary Fund is urging that the legislation pass, in the context of a broader austerity pact, which includes an agreement to forgive \$960 million of Honduras's \$4.6 billion debt.

Teachers strike continues in Guatemala

On February 28 hundreds of striking Guatemalan teachers entered Guatemala City after walking for 250 kilometers from western Guatemala. They were met by thousands of their colleagues at a giant demonstration. An Associated Press dispatch quoted teacher Joaquin Sanchez, he said, "We are tired but ready to show the government that we will not surrender our cause."

The march began three days earlier in Huehuetenango, 250 kilometers from Guatemala City. The teachers have been on strike since January 20. Negotiations began last week mediated by the city's Catholic Archbishop. The government cancelled an earlier threat to fire 10,000 teachers as long as the teachers returned to work and refrained from protests for the rest of the term. Government officials are offering a paltry \$12 monthly increase in teachers' wages. Guatemalan teachers' salaries begin at \$190 a month and reach a maximum of \$390, after 23 years of service.

Argentine unemployed demand help for school children and seniors

Supporters of the Independent Movement of Unemployed and Retired Persons (MIJD) occupied the Ministry of Education in Buenos Aires on February 28 and began a hunger strike to demand the government fulfill its agreement to aid schools and unemployed elderly workers.

MIJD leaders said the Duhalde administration agreed to provide 10,000 high school scholarships for poor families and 10,000 sets of school supplies for elementary students. It also agreed to extend certain unemployment subsidies to unemployed workers over the age of 60. Until the agreement is actually implemented, the protesters say, their hunger strike will continue.

Chilean copper miners denounce firings

On February 22, local union leaders occupied the offices of the Copper Corporation (CODELCO) for a few hours to protest the firing of militant workers at the El Teniente copper mine in northern Chile. The victimized workers had opposed a joint union-management project between CODELCO and the national leadership of the miners union, the Copper Federation (FC), to boost productivity at El Teniente and contract out jobs now performed by union members.

Service workers walk out at Yale University

Five thousand service workers began a strike on Monday at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut to demand improved pay and pensions and to protest stalled contract negotiations. The walkout by clerical, technical, service and maintenance workers—members of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union—has been joined by several hundred graduate students and teaching assistants, whose union has not been recognized by Yale officials. Many undergraduate students also joined picket lines in support of the strikers.

The university, which has announced that managers will fill in for striking workers, has refused to budge from its offer of a six-year contract, with annual raises for most workers of 3 or 4 percent. Union officials, who have dropped their wage demands four times during the last year of negotiations, say they are seeking a four-year contract with retroactive raises of 3 and 4 percent for the first year, then raises of between 5.5 and 8.5 percent for each of the remaining three years.

Pay is so low for many workers that some rely on state assistance to take care of their families. Yale, which has an \$11 billion endowment, proposes to pay less than \$700 a month in retirement benefits for an employee with 20 years on the job. Victoria Martin, a custodian, told the Associated Press she was striking for better pay and pensions. "They really don't want to pay us custodians," Martin said. "We're the lowest people on the totem pole, and they really just want to give us pennies."

Northwest Airlines seeks deep cuts from pilots union

The union representing about 6,000 pilots at Northwest Airlines divulged that corporate management is seeking to impose pay cuts, layoffs and work rule changes amounting to total cost reductions of 37 percent and resulting in yearly savings of \$442 million.

The proposal would cut wages by 17.4 percent, increase pilots' workload by two to three days per month and furlough 343 pilots. The furloughs would raise the number of idled pilots to 1,036 by 2004. Mark McClain, who heads the Airline Pilots Association's (ALPA) executive council at Northwest, also says the proposals would wipe out all job security gains won through a 15-day strike in 1998. "It's all-encompassing and it's very aggressive. It covers all aspects of the contract," he said.

Northwest Airlines lost \$1.2 billion over the last two years and claims it must have the concessions or face bankruptcy. The pilots are the first labor group management has approached about give-backs.

Tyson workers strike in Wisconsin

Workers at Tyson Foods Inc.'s Dorskocil Food Service plant in Jefferson, Wisconsin struck the giant chicken processor after voting 400-9 to reject major concessions. Tyson, which garnered a 4.2 percent profit from the plant during the first quarter of 2003, makes pepperoni products for Tombstone, DiGiorno, Domino's and Jack's pizzas.

The company wants to cut pay by 73 cents an hour and freeze wages for four years. It is also pushing to increase health care coverage rates to \$40 a week. According to the United Food and Commercial

Workers union (UFCW), the out-of-pocket expenses to workers could total \$4,600 a year for basic family coverage. In addition, the company wants to freeze pension benefits for current workers and eliminate them for all future new hires. Vacation is to be cut by two weeks and a 50 percent reduction in sick leave is being sought.

Connecticut state workers protest budget cutting

Some 1,500 Connecticut state workers jammed the Capitol building in Hartford to protest the General Assembly's deficit reduction plan. Forty-nine of the protesters held a sit-in blocking the entrance and were arrested by state police.

The crowd denounced Republican Governor John Rowland as well as the Democratic leadership for \$235 million to \$270 million in spending cuts, which included layoffs of 2,800 state workers. Among the sit-downers was an 82-year-old woman who said she was protesting for her daughter, a state hospital employee. Another worker arrested wore a placard around his neck with a picture of a person who lost state services due to the budget cuts. Demonstrators were charged with disorderly conduct.

Broadway orchestra musicians prepared to strike

Orchestra musicians who play for Broadway musicals in New York City voted to strike as early as March 3 unless an agreement can be reached between the producers' group and the American Federation of Musicians Local 802. On March , 422 of 440 musicians granted strike authorization as Jed Bernstein, president of the League of American Theatres and Producers, announced the "show would go on" and indicated that Broadway houses would use high-tech computerized music and equipment to replace musicians.

Bernstein has made much out of a clause in the musicians' contract that requires each production house to hire a minimum number of musicians that can range from 3 to 26. Under certain circumstances this has led to additional non-performing musicians, called "walkers," being added to productions. "It is impossible in this economic environment to propagate ... guaranteed minimum employment, regardless of the artistic needs of a production," Bernstein argued.

Local 802 has said it would negotiate the issue, but the production houses apparently have their eye on completely replacing live musicians. It costs \$60,000 to make a single digital recording of a performance and a few thousand dollars to rent equipment to replay the recording during a production run. By contrast, the cost to maintain three orchestra musicians for one year is estimated to be \$264,000. Top Broadway composers have signed a petition opposing the move away from live music, charging, it would "take away our means of expression in exchange for increased profits."

Monitoring of workers by companies increases

The American Management Association reports that with the economy in decline and the pressure for increased productivity management has doubled the surveillance of workers since 1997. The association's survey, cited in *USA Today*, states, "More than three-quarters of major companies record and review employee communications and on-the-job activities."

The CEO of Napco Security Systems reports, "We've been a public company for 30 years, and we've never seen this increase in monitoring employees." Many techniques are being employed, including audio and video monitoring, the recording of keystrokes, email, online chats, instant messages as well as infiltrating investigators into the workforce to spy on workers.

Office cleaners strike Toronto Dominion Centre

Eighty office cleaners at the Toronto Dominion Centre have been on strike since February 17. The workers, mostly women earning \$9.50

an hour, are striking in support of demands for wage increases with retroactive pay, as well as for an end to the present two-tier sick-leave scheme. Currently, some of the workers are not entitled to sick leave, their only option being an application for short-term disability after losing three unpaid days to illness.

The workers, who have been without a contract since October of 2001, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2295. On February 26 they voted to reject the Hurley Corporation's latest offer by a two-to-one margin. The rejected offer provided for a wage increase of approximately 3 percent without addressing the retroactive pay or sick-leave demands.

Picketing resumes in UBC strike

Sixteen hundred teaching assistants at the University of British Columbia resumed rotating pickets last week after the annual Reading Week break. The main demand of the striking workers, who perform an estimated 40 percent of the teaching at the university, is for the administration to waive tuition. During the previous year, tuition increased by \$500, with a further increase of 20 percent recently approved by the university's board of governors.

Last week, the university put forward an offer of a 10 percent wage increase over three years, but has refused to discuss the issue of tuition. The president of the teaching assistants' union, CUPE Local 2278, Alex Grant vowed, "There won't be a contract without tuition."

The striking teaching assistants have received support from the union representing office, technical and childcare workers at the University of Victoria (CUPE Local 951). The student union (Alma Mater Society) initially moved to close its facilities in solidarity with the teaching assistants, but later withdrew this motion, pledging instead up to \$15,000 of financial support. City buses have been diverted from the campus in respect of picket lines.



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