

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 March 2003

## Guatemalan teachers strike continues

On March 5 striking teachers continued demonstrations in Guatemala City and other cities in Guatemala with the support of trade unionists, agricultural workers and students. The teachers have been on strike for seven weeks. The protest included the blocking of major highways and border posts between Guatemala and Mexico and the takeover of the Santa Elena airport near Peten, an important tourist and archeological destination.

The 60,000 teachers, who earn in the range of \$190 to \$390 a month, are insisting on a 100 percent raise and an increase in the education budget. President Alfonso Portillo has threatened to turn to a so-called “self-education program” that would turn the schools over to parents’ committees. However, education ministry officials intimated that the government is considering increasing its wage offer to \$36, up from \$12 a month.

## Sao Paulo transit strike

On March 6, 1,500 transit workers for private city bus lines that operate in the north and west of Sao Paulo went on strike over unpaid wages and to demand increased vouchers for foodstuffs. Three hundred and twenty buses at 27 bus lines are affected, some of which feed Sao Paulo’s subway system.

## Chilean unions demand cost of living adjustments

The Chilean Central Workers Union (CUT)—that country’s main labor federation—together with the Transport Workers Confederation and the Association of Parents has demanded that the Lagos administration decree an emergency cost of living adjustment to all workers and retirees as compensation for increases in the cost of fuel, transit, bread and other essential products and services.

They also demanded help for parents who send their children to municipal and private schools, declaring that eighty percent of parents in the Santiago region have taken their children out of school because they can no longer afford to pay.

CUT Secretary General Jose Ortiz said that “the government must assume political responsibility for the country for all Chileans” by taking extraordinary measures such as the general readjustment in wages and salaries of at least ten percent.

## Argentine railroad workers to strike March 12

Two major rail unions in Argentina announced that their members will go on a 24-hour strike Wednesday, March 12 over pay increase demands. The strike will affect passenger and freight traffic across the nation.

Horacio Caminos, the leader of the union that includes all train operators (Fraternidad), declared that year-long negotiations are at a standstill. The unions are demanding a forty percent raise; the railroads’ best offer is twenty percent. The railroad unions pointed out that their aim is to re-establish a buying power that was

weakened by last year’s devaluation of the Argentine peso.

Fraternidad cancelled a December 5 strike when the Labor Ministry imposed mandatory mediation. The impasse has not been broken, however, with Caminos blaming management intransigence.

## No victory for returning Mexican university workers

Following an eleven-day strike, 400 education workers at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala returned to work on March 7, having obtained no concessions from university authorities. Despite claims by their union that the strike had been victorious, the workers returned to work accepting a raise of 4.3 percent, exactly what management had offered before the strike. The union had also asked for an eight dollar monthly bonus, but management agreed to an unspecified productivity-based “stimulus.”

## Houston Symphony on strike

Orchestra members of the Houston Symphony walked out on strike at the conclusion of their March 8 performance after management imposed a new contract and rejected last-minute union counter-proposals. Symphony administrators demanded an 8.8 percent reduction in minimum salary. The musicians union responded with an offer of a four-year agreement that would grant management \$1.15 million in concessions in the first year while raising starting pay over the course of the contract.

Douglass Hamel, an attorney representing management, flatly rejected the union’s offer. Musicians representative Dave Kirk called Hamel a “hired gun,” charging, “he’s been brought in to break up the Houston Symphony. There can be no other explanation for the summary rejection of our proposal.” On the first day of picketing, musicians protested in front of Hamel’s home.

## Union at American Airlines reveals company concession demands

The union representing ground workers at American Airlines revealed an extensive list of concessions being demanded by corporate management. American’s financial advisors claim that the airline must receive \$620 million in annual concessions from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) as part of an overall \$1.8 billion package the airline is seeking from its unionized workforce.

Among its features are some \$70 million in cost cutting from outsourcing all cabin cleaning, transfer driving, non-hub cargo operations, aircraft fueling, container and tub movers and interline transfers. Also farmed out would be bus driving at Los Angeles International and Chicago O’Hare airports. Most of these functions, previously performed by unionized labor, would be done by contractors and lower-paid workers. American also wants to eliminate job security provisions and longevity pay, and cut chart rates for all job classifications by one percent.

The TWU rejected the concessions package but nevertheless declared, "Our consultants and advisers have concluded that the company does need relief, but have not yet confirmed the specific amount."

### **Strike continues at Kentucky uranium plant**

Talks between the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC) and the Paper, Allied-Industrial Workers (PACE) broke off March 4 without any resolution of the month-old strike in Paducah, Kentucky.

Leon Owens, president of PACE Local 5-550, said, "Right now it's apparent to me that the corporation just has no interest in dealing with the union." USEC responded saying they were "disappointed" in the union's contract proposal and called it a "retrenchment" that "would take the two parties further apart."

About 620 workers walked off the job February 4 after voting by a 97 percent margin to reject USEC's contract proposal. Management's offer included 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, as well as a demand that workers pay more for health insurance premiums.

### **Study reveals hunger among farm workers**

A new study has revealed that nearly half of migrant and seasonal farm workers in North Carolina are unable to provide food for their families. Researchers at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center surveyed 102 households in five counties of central North Carolina, interviewing workers at 22 sites such as farm-labor camps, trailer parks, homes, churches and laundromats.

Farm workers with children faced the greatest risk of hunger and are four times more likely to have limited food access than the general population of the United States. Many do not qualify for food stamps or other government programs because they are not legal residents, even though they pay taxes.

"I think one of the things we need to look at in the long term is the fact that this is an issue of poverty," declared Sara Quandt, professor of public health and the study's lead researcher. "Farm workers need to be paid a wage that reflects the value that we attribute to our food supply."

### **Walkout widens at University of British Columbia**

On March 7, 1,600 clerical and library workers at the University of British Columbia joined 1,600 teaching assistants on strike. The workers are striking against university demands for a wage-freeze (amounting to a 14% cut in purchasing power over six years) and a significant health-benefit rollback. They are also demanding pay equity for women workers. The university's administration has also indicated some intent to seek contracting-out language in the negotiations as well as for more draconian measures against alleged abuse of sick-leave provisions. Clerical and library workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2950.

The teaching assistants, represented by CUPE Local 2278, have been on strike since February 11. Their main demand is for a tuition waiver. Teaching assistants are usually graduate students, for whom paying tuition is a condition of employment. Tuition has increased by approximately \$1,500 over 3 years, representing a 16 percent pay cut to the teaching assistants. The teaching assistants recently rejected a university offer of a 10 percent wage increase

over 3 years that did not include any discussion of a tuition waiver.

CUPE Local 116, representing campus support staff, including construction workers, lab assistants, catering, cleaning and technology workers, among others, is also set to strike. On March 7, workers from all three union locals, along with hundreds of university students, picketed the administration building. The administration has asked the Labour Relations board for an injunction barring teaching assistants from picketing.

### **Workers at Toronto office building reject employer's latest offer**

Eighty office cleaners at the Toronto Dominion Centre in Toronto have rejected an offer by their employer, the Hurley Corporation, that divided salary improvements into raises and a so-called attendance bonus, which would be paid every six months based on the amount of hours worked. The workers are demanding all the increase go towards augmenting their base pay and that the present two-tier sick leave system be scrapped. The workers, who have been on strike since February 17, have been without a contract since October 2001.

### **Ontario hospitals punish workers for day of action**

On February 13, thousands of medical technologists, pharmacists, social workers, lab technicians, and other workers at 40 hospitals across Ontario staged a one-day walkout in support of their demands for a 23 percent raise over two years. They have been without a contract for 11 months.

According to the workers' union, the Ontario Public Sector Employees' Union (OPSEU), seven of the 40 hospitals involved have responded to the walkout by suspending or reprimanding staff. The hospitals include those in Stratford, Chatham-Kent, Guelph, Collingwood, Thunder Bay, Kingston, as well as the Baycrest Hospital in Toronto.



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