

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 March 2003

Public health doctors strike in Bolivia

Twelve thousand public health system doctors and paramedics carried out a 48-hour work stoppage in Bolivia on March 11. The health workers are demanding a 28 percent wage increase and state subsidies to provide no-cost medical care for pregnant women and children under the age of five. Public health clinics were paralyzed during the strike, except for emergency care.

More protests in El Salvador against privatization of the public health system

Thousands of striking public health doctors and their supporters carried out a mass protest on March 13 against attempts to privatize health services. In addition to striking doctors, participating in the protest were other union members, members of rural organizations, religious figures and left-wing candidates in upcoming presidential elections.

The doctors have been on strike since September 19. Public health authorities insist that these doctors have abandoned their posts and that the system has been working well since January.

Guatemalan teachers' strike ends

After a 50-day strike, Guatemalan public school teachers returned to work on March 12. The government agreed to raise teachers' wages by \$20 a month, up from its earlier offer of \$12. There is no news on how the government resolved the other demand by the teachers that the education budget be increased.

Throughout the seven-week strike, teachers mobilized across the country, rallying in Guatemala City and blocking roads and border crossings with Mexico and El Salvador. While the 60,000 teachers are now back to work, the struggle is not over yet. The government is refusing to pay teachers their February wages. The government insists that it will not do so because a court had declared the strike illegal.

Railroad strike paralyzes Argentina

A 24-hour strike by the train operators union (FRATERNIDAD) and supported by other rail unions paralyzed rail services in Argentina on March 12. The strike was over wages.

The three central stations in Buenos Aires, terminals of the trains that branch out to other parts of the country, were totally inactive. Government promises to provide emergency services did not materialize until late in the day. Buenos Aires's suburban trains that serve 1.5 million riders did not operate at all. Following the strike and to forestall further strike action the railroads agreed to a 15 percent wage increase. Since December 2002, consumer prices in Argentina have gone up by more than 70 percent, causing workers to press for higher wages. Despite the wage increase, rail workers' buying power still lags behind price increases.

Buenos Aires' subway workers announce random job actions

Beginning March 16, the five subway lines that serve Buenos Aires will undergo random work stoppages of undetermined duration, according to Juan Manuel Palacios, leader of the Union of Motorized Rail workers (UTA). The subway agency Metrovias denounced the

strike and declared it illegal, claiming that these tactics will not allow the company to take contingency measures.

UTA leaders say subway work is unhealthy and that Metrovias is violating agreements on working conditions. The union declared that the job action will continue until Metrovias stops the violations and municipal authorities officially acknowledge that subway work is unhealthy. Last week the city fined Metrovias \$1 million for violating health and safety regulations.

Metrovias management took the position that the fine is "ridiculous" and plans to appeal. Management claims the real reason for the job action is to press for a wage increase like the 15 percent raise won by rail workers a few days ago.

Death threats and sex abuse at Connecticut factory

A Connecticut factory which makes frozen bread for the Subway fast food chain and other companies is presently under investigation by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for making death threats against its employees who have been seeking representation by the United Auto Workers union. The NLRB had been scheduled to begin a hearing in February into sexual harassment at the company called Chef Solutions, which is owned by Lufthansa airlines. When allegations of death threats emerged, the NLRB postponed the hearing to look into the new charges.

Some 65 percent of the factory's 200 workers are Hispanic immigrants. The charges against Chef Solutions make for chilling reading. Ruben Zepeda, a member of the union organizing committee who was fired from Chef Solutions, was visited by a company manager at his new job before he was scheduled to testify with the NLRB. When he refused to accept a \$15,000 bribe, the manager pulled up his coat revealing a handgun, according to Zepeda.

Women workers at Chef Solutions describe a reign of sexual terror where managers grabbed their bodies and constantly demanded sex in return for retention of their jobs. Thomas Meiklejohn, attorney for the workers, told the *New Haven Advocate*, "I have never seen an employer that fostered or permitted such blatant disregard for the rights of its employees in my 25 years practicing labor law."

United seeks to tear up union contracts

United Airlines anticipates it will begin the process of voiding labor contracts this week as part of increasing pressure on pilots, flight attendants and machinists to accept permanent long-term concessions. If the bankruptcy court grants the company rights to tear up labor contracts the procedure would not be culminated until May, allowing management and the labor bureaucracy time to reach a deal that could successfully be imposed on the workforce.

After filing for bankruptcy last December 9, United gained temporary cuts from workers, saving the company about \$70 million a month. United had expected to continue losing \$10 million to \$15 million a day, but the cuts produced a \$1 million net profit for the month of January. In order to meet conditions imposed by bankers under a debtor-in-possession (DIP) loan package, however, United

must get further cuts from workers totaling \$2.56 billion per year.

After executives looted the airlines to bolster their salaries and stock options during the boom, concessions do not sit well with many workers. Last week, a majority of United's machinists signed cards authorizing an election that would allow the workers to decertify the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and elect the Aircraft Machinists Fraternal Association. The San Francisco *Chronicle* quoted a machinist as saying, "We feel the union is not representing us fairly. We do not trust the people running the show." IAM Vice President Robert Roach called the election a "distraction" and claimed it placed United Airlines "in peril."

The machinists, like other United workers, gave up raises in the first part of the 1990s for an employee stock ownership plan. UAL stock hovered below one dollar last week, drastically dropping the value of stocks held by workers under the so-called employee ownership plan. Under the plan, used to bring the union bureaucracy onto the board of directors and convince workers they had a common interest with the corporate CEOs and big stockholders, union members once controlled 55 percent of the company's stock. Union members now control less than 20 percent.

Southwest Airlines flight attendants protest long hours

Southwest Airlines flight attendants protested at airports in Baltimore, Chicago and Oakland over long workdays and no breaks. Presently, the 7,000 flight attendants represented by the Transport Workers Union put in 10-hour days that often extend to 12 hours, while they are only compensated for those hours in the air. The airline uses only three flight attendants per flight. Unlike attendants at other airlines, Southwest flight attendants must clean the planes at the conclusion of a flight.

Southwest is now arguing it must extend the workday to 13 hours. Management and the TWU have been in negotiations since May of last year. Since the events of September 11, 2001, Southwest, a notorious low-cost carrier, has maintained profitability. However, last year profits fell by 53 percent. Recently Southwest has started up its first coast-to-coast non-stop flight.

Northwest flight attendants seek new union

The Professional Flight Attendant Association (PFAA) says that a majority of Northwest Airlines' 11,000 active and furloughed flight attendants have signed cards seeking to displace the Teamsters union. Flight attendants at Northwest carried on a stout resistance to the Teamsters bureaucracy during the contract negotiations of 1999-2000 in which the administration of James Hoffa attempted to ram through tentative agreements. When flight attendants began to organize resistance, including sickouts against both Northwest and the Teamsters union, the company fired several employees. The federal government raided homes of dissident attendants who sponsored opposition web sites and confiscated hard disks in an effort to construct criminal cases.

When a new Teamsters leadership was elected and attempted to collaborate with the dissident faction, Hoffa removed local leaders and established a trusteeship, claiming they were not exerting sufficient opposition to the PFAA. If the National Mediation Board should verify the PFAA has a sufficient number of cards authorizing an election, a vote could take place in May,

UBC workers defy back-to-work legislation

On March 13 and 14, over 3,000 striking clerical workers, librarians and teaching assistants at the University of British Columbia defied Liberal legislation mandating a 20-day "cooling-off" period. The workers continued their job action and were joined by students in

protests around the campus. Over the weekend, the provincial Supreme Court granted the university an injunction barring picketing or any other attempt to prevent people from entering university buildings.

Alma Mater Society academic Vice President Laura Best, speaking at a rally last week, denounced the Campbell government's legislation for its "serious implications for the right to strike and for freedom of speech for all students on campus, now and in the future."

Two clerical workers were taken to hospital with minor injuries after a driver drove through a group of picketers. Although the license number, vehicle description and identity of the driver were recorded by many witnesses, it remains to be seen whether or what charges will result from this callous attempt to injure or kill a worker.

The teaching assistants, represented by CUPE Local 2278, have been on strike since February 11 and are demanding a tuition waiver. They were joined on March 7 by the university's clerical and library workers, members of CUPE Local 2950. CUPE Local 116, representing campus support staff, including construction workers, lab assistants, catering, cleaning and technology workers, among others, is also set to strike, and these workers have joined the other striking workers on picket lines and at protests.

Strike at St. John's airport

Sixty support staff at St. John's International Airport in Newfoundland went on strike March 10. The workers include office staff, firefighters and maintenance workers at the airport and are organized by the Public Service Alliance of Canada. They are demanding wage parity with workers at other airports of similar size, which would mean a 12 percent increase during the first year of the new contract.

The workers have been without a contract since November 30, 2001. In November of 2002 a tentative agreement was reached and ratified by the union membership, only to be rejected by the airport's board of directors. During the conflict, the airport authority has hired scab labor in the form of private snowplow drivers. This has involved the airport workers in confrontations with the police.

Bombardier settlement destroys hundreds of jobs

A settlement reached at Bombardier de Havilland's Downsview aerospace plant near Toronto provides for the layoff of hundreds of workers. Unnamed sources told the *Toronto Star* there would be as many as 500 layoffs at the plant, which presently employs 3,000 workers. The company had threatened the workers, whose present contract has yet to expire, with the wholesale transfer of production to the Montreal plant.

Two thousand of the three thousand workers at the plant are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union. CAW President Buzz Hargrove defended the layoffs, falsely identifying aerospace workers' interests with the profitability of their employers. Hargrove claimed the settlement represented the best that could be hoped for "under extraordinarily difficult circumstances with the orders down or cancelled as airlines in the US declare bankruptcy and the threat of war depresses travel."



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