

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 March 2003

## Mexican airline workers poised to strike March 31

Fifteen hundred AeroMexico stewards, members of the Association of Aviation Stewards (ASSA), declared March 17 that contract negotiations are now taking place under a March 31 strike deadline. ASSA leaders indicated there will be union assemblies throughout the week to discuss the progress of negotiations.

An ASSA spokesperson said that among the unresolved issues is a list of grievances over company violations of workers' contractual rights. The ASSA leadership, however, has made it clear it is willing to limit demands because of the crisis in the air transportation industry.

## Brazilian unions accuse Lula government of breaking "social pact"

On March 15, 1,000 delegates from 27 unions issued a document accusing President Luis Inacio da Silva—also known as Lula—of breaking a social pact between the unions and the ruling Workers Party (PT). The issue at conflict is a government proposal to privatize government pension plans, which would result in the gutting of retirement benefits.

The document cites Lula's own words from the first days of the PT's existence, calling on unions to "push the government against the wall to prevent such a great wound on the rights of public employees."

The public employees unions warned that unionized workers would become radicalized and strike in defense of pension rights. The union bureaucracy is seeking a compromise with the government that preserves the public character of pensions and says it is seeking improved benefits and greater rights. The union leaders claim that Lula has used accounting tricks that suggest the pension system is in deficit, when in fact it is not.

Facing increasing opposition from the unions and from the left wing of his own party, Lula is soliciting support from more right-wing parties, such as the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), which was voted out of office this year but controls a substantial block of votes in Congress. Lula formally offered the PMDB a role in the government, including future ministerial posts.

## Sao Paulo professors vote to strike

On March 19, professors and employees of the Catholic Pontifical University of Sao Paulo (PUC-SP) voted to strike this week over wages. The professors are demanding an immediate 16.41 percent raise while management is offering incremental increases, including an immediate 4 percent raise, then 3.27 percent in September and 9.2 percent next January.

## Brazilian Ford workers strike

Workers at the Camacari Ford plant in the Brazilian state of Bahia voted to continue their walkout against the giant automaker

at a mass meeting March 22. The workers at the only auto plant in Northeastern Brazil voted to reject a management offer of 8.1 percent and to continue the strike to demand a 25 percent raise and wage parity with the workers at the Sao Paulo Ford plant.

## Sao Paulo metal workers to strike

Sao Paulo metal workers voted on March 23 to begin a strike Wednesday, March 26 to demand a 10 percent wage increase. Initially the strike will affect 40 factories in Brazil's industrial capital. The workers also plan to have daily marches and work stoppages at rotating locations, mobilizing all 280,000 Sao Paulo metal workers. Eventually the strike wave will encompass all of Sao Paulo state.

Eleno Jose Bezerra, president of the Sao Paulo Metal Workers Union (SMSP), explained that last November's 10 percent raise was eaten up in four months by Brazil's inflation. He indicated that Sao Paulo workers are suffering increases in municipal fees for refuse collection and public lighting. At the current rate of inflation, workers will lose 25 to 30 percent of their purchasing power this year.

The tenth congress of Sao Paulo Metal Workers approved the strike action. The union decided to choose the most profitable, export-oriented companies, with low inventories.

## Florida tomato pickers protest super-exploitation

A group of immigrant farm workers from Florida carried out a 10-day hunger strike outside the headquarters of Taco Bell in Irvine, California, charging that the fast food giant profits from outrageous working conditions imposed on the tomato pickers. Workers in the Florida tomato fields earn as little as one cent for each pound of tomatoes they pick and others have been forced to work under threat of violence from growers' thugs—conditions that law enforcement agencies have classified as slavery.

One of the hunger strikers, Lucas Benitez, leader of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, told the *Guardian* newspaper in England, "Taco Bell has a policy that it will not buy food from contractors that mistreat animals. All we are asking is that they have the same policy for humans."

The strikers are demanding that Taco Bell persuade Florida growers to pay a living wage. A Taco Bell spokeswoman said the protest was "misdirected" and that the company maintained a policy of not interfering in the labor relations of other companies.

In 2002, three Florida labor contractors were convicted of slavery, extortion and firearms offences and sentenced to jail terms of 30 years. In 1999 another Florida contractor held 30 workers in forced labor conditions. Three workers who escaped but later recaptured were beaten up.

## Cintas workers file suit to regain overtime pay

Unorganized workers backed by a labor union have filed a class

action lawsuit against Cintas Corp. of Cincinnati, Ohio, seeking compensation for millions of dollars of unpaid overtime. The lawsuit, filed in US District Court in San Francisco on behalf of 3,500 workers, says that the largest and most profitable supplier of uniforms violated the Fair Labor Standards Act by classifying route sales workers as managerial and therefore ineligible for pay beyond 40 hours a week. The suit involves workers in California, Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey who were forced to work up to 70 hours a week without overtime pay.

The suit is being supported by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, which is seeking to organize Cintas's 27,000 laundry and uniform workers nationwide.

#### **Contractor rejects union climb-down in New York strike**

The private contractor who manages maintenance and the ferry transport to the Department of Agriculture's Plum Island Animal Disease Center has rejected the striking union's latest offer to return to work. The offer by International Union of Operating Engineers Local 30 included the dropping of its previous insistence that the company had to lay off 58 replacement workers from the facility as a condition of returning to work.

The 76 unionized workers struck against the contractor, LB&B Associates, back in August of last year. In December, the union convinced workers to drop its wage and benefit demands and return to work under the belief that replacement workers would be dismissed. But LB&B refused to let go of its strikebreakers.

In its last proposal the union said it was willing to return to work under the contract proposed by LB&B back in August. It also offered to drop its unfair labor practices complaints while allowing the NLRB to determine whether union or replacement workers would retain Plum Island jobs.

#### **Airlines cite war for cutbacks**

Northwest Airlines slashed 4,900 jobs and cut flights by 12 percent, charging that the war in Iraq has led to a decline in flying by the public. The airline said it might take further measures in reducing the workforce to maintain profitability.

American Airlines issued a warning last week that it might also cut jobs due to a drop in demand. Continental Airlines joined the chorus as well, announcing it would reduce its workforce.

#### **Court intervenes to end University of British Columbia strike**

At the University of British Columbia, over 3,000 workers resumed the performance of their duties last week, in response to an injunction by the provincial Supreme Court barring picketing on the campus. The injunction was requested by the university administration after the workers had briefly defied legislation by the provincial Liberal government mandating a 20-day cooling-off period. Teaching assistants have been carrying out some of their normal duties in a "democracy village," erected around the Goddess of Democracy statue, by way of protesting the anti-democratic legislation and injunction.

The teaching assistants, numbering 1,600 and represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2278, have been on strike since February, in support of their demand for a tuition waiver. Recent tuition increases amount to an effective 16 percent pay cut for the teaching assistants, with further tuition increases being proposed by the administration. The university's

clerical and library workers, who opposed a wage freeze and demanded pay equity for women workers, joined the teaching assistants on the picket lines in early March.

Earlier this month, two workers were injured when a car drove into a crowd of picketers. Royal Canadian Mounted Police Staff-Sergeant Barry Hickman indicated the likelihood that the perpetrator of this criminal act will escape without penalty: "We know who the driver is, the person has been quite up-front with us about everything, and it's possible there won't be any charges laid at all, on either side."

The university recently rejected CUPE's offer to employ a mediator/arbitrator, suggesting that the university is expecting the provincial government to impose a contract on the workers. Meanwhile, 750 clerical workers at Simon Fraser University could also be on strike as of Monday, March 24. Their main demands are for improvements to wages and benefits.

#### **Agreement-in-principle reached in Vidéotron strike**

Two thousand two hundred workers will hold a ratification vote on an agreement-in-principle reached between Québec cable and Internet company Vidéotron and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The workers, located in Montreal and Québec City, have been on strike/lockout since May 8, 2002. The main issue in the bitter dispute has been Vidéotron's intention to cut jobs and outsource to lower wage companies—including the wholesale transfer of 650 workers to the company Alentron, where they will receive a much lower wage.

During the dispute, Vidéotron has employed scab labor with the blessings of the Quebec Federation of Labour. Rather than appeal for support from the working class, the union leadership has repeatedly appealed to the big-business Parti Québécois (PQ) to intervene in the strike. The PQ, however, has encouraged the wringing of concessions from the Vidéotron workers. Not only is former PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard a member of the company's negotiating team—Vidéotron's purchase by Québec-based media giant Quebecor was financed by the provincially-controlled financial institution *Caisse de dépôt et placement*.

No details of the settlement have been released, pending the ratification vote.



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