

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 April 2003

Argentine textile workers reject government mediation

Workers at the Brukman plant met on April 22 with labor ministry officials in the wake of violent struggles between their supporters and the police in Buenos Aires the day before. The workers rejected government intervention.

The incident took place as Brukman workers attempted to return to the plant that they had been occupying before being expelled the previous week. Five hundred heavily armed cops blocked the workers' way. The police then attacked the protesters, chasing them while firing tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. The police did not distinguish between onlookers, reporters or protesters, repressing and humiliating them equally.

Several reporters were beaten, forced to kiss the ground and arrested, some of them with injuries from rubber bullets. Fleeing workers were corralled in a pediatric hospital, 20 blocks from the factory. The police fired tear gas inside the hospital, endangering patients and medical personnel.

Brukman workers, mainly women, took the plant over in December 2001, declaring that the owners owed them back wages and had abandoned the factory. To protect their jobs they kept producing clothing.

Unemployed continue protests in Argentina

On April 23, two days after the violent repression of textile employees, jobless workers protested in different parts of Buenos Aires against the police repression and demanded help for the unemployed. Groups of workers, some as large as 400, mobilized and blocked roads in the city and province of Buenos Aires throughout the day.

Mariano Sanchez, leader of an unemployed workers organization, declared that the government's claims that it wanted more industrial output were a lie since the Bruckman workers who had occupied the plant "were putting the factory to work." The workers also demanded greater assistance for the unemployed.

Chilean public employees to strike this week

Leaders of the National Association of State Employees (ANEF) announced April 27 that they would strike on April 30 to protest anti-labor draft legislation. The date coincides with the income tax deadline in Chile. ANEF accused the government of not respecting labor by proposing laws that would force workers to compete against each other for promotions.

Hundreds of former agricultural workers rally in Mexico City

On April 25, hundreds of former participants of the bracero program that brought immigrant labor into the United States blocked the Mexican legislature in Mexico City, demanding that they be paid the many millions that the Mexican government placed in forced savings for them from 1942 to 1964. Many of the elderly workers marched from different regions in Mexico to attend the rally.

The workers asked to meet congressional leaders, but their request was ignored.

The bracero program contracted Mexican agricultural labor to US growers. Four hundred thousand workers participated and are owed between \$500 million and \$1 billion. The funds, discounted from workers salaries, were supposed to be paid back to the workers at the end of their contracts. The money, dutifully deposited in Mexico's Bank of Agricultural Credit, was never returned. The government now says it lost

track of the funds and is requiring the workers to sue individually for their shares.

At the rally, the workers warned they would continue their protest in front of Congress as long as necessary for their demands to be addressed.

New York building workers reach settlement

Negotiators for both the building workers union in New York City and building owners and management announced last week that they had reached a contract settlement. The agreement calls for wage increases averaging 2.8 percent a year for three years, which is below the union demand that wages keep up with the rate of inflation, currently averaging 3 percent a year. The settlement also includes some employer contributions for health care and pensions.

The Reality Advisory Board that represents 3,000 building owners and managers had complained that the cost of running the buildings had increased in the last number of years. However the union, Local 32 BJ of the Service Employees International Union, representing 28,000 workers including doormen, handymen and porters, pointed out that the workers are facing increased expenses including such things as higher local taxes and increased subway fares.

Northern Michigan hospital strike in sixth month

The five-month-plus strike by 470 nurses at Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey is now the longest hospital strike in US history. The hospital, facing diminishing Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements, pressures to invest in new technology and increasing liability insurance premiums, is following the road of other hospitals by seeking to impose that burden on the backs of its nurses.

Nurses, represented by the Teamsters union, have remained determined to resist increased workloads, low staffing levels and mandatory overtime. The hospital has acquired the notorious Nursing Corporation of Denver, which has provided strikebreaking personnel for hospitals all across the United States. While Northern Michigan management has refused to disclose the cost of Nursing Corporations services, they usually dwarf the cost of hospitals' permanent staffs.

Court settlement in Pacific island sweatshop case

A US district judge has approved a \$20 million settlement to be paid by 54 US clothing retailers to workers on the Pacific island of Saipan. These workers labored under sweatshop conditions to produce clothes with brand names such as Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Target and the Gap and bearing the "Made in the USA" label.

Lawyers and civil rights proponents exposed the fact that US retailers had taken advantage of the unique position of Saipan—a US protectorate occupied in the latter part of World War II that is exempt from US immigration rules. Asian capitalists set up shop in Saipan and brought mostly female workers there from China, Vietnam, the Philippines and other poor nations with promises of ultimately receiving high-paid jobs in the United States.

Instead workers labored behind barbed wire fences, were robbed of pay, subjected to poor health conditions and received bad food. Saipan's minimum wage is \$3.05 an hour, nearly \$2.00 below the \$5.15 minimum rate in the United States. Because Saipan was inside the US customs zone, retailers reaped windfall profits by avoiding import quotas while being able to market clothes as "Made in the USA."

Michael Rubin, lead attorney for the workers, said law firms had waved most of their fees. The bulk of the settlement is to go as compensation and back pay to 30,000 workers and to set up an independent system to monitor working conditions on the island. Retailers admitted no wrongdoing in arriving at the settlement.

Minnesota hospital workers strike again

Hospital service workers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area launched another one-day protest strike, this time with a walkout by 1,000 union members at Children's and United Hospitals. More than a month has passed without any talks between management and the Service Employees International Union Local 113.

Workers at Children's and United voted by 90 percent to support the 24-hour strike to protest the hospitals' attempts to foist all future increases in health care premiums onto workers. Workers are incensed that hospital executives and high-level managers pay half the \$488 average monthly premium that workers pay for family coverage.

Some 5,900 workers, comprised of nursing assistants, technical, professional, food service and other support workers at 12 hospitals, one nursing home and two laundry services, are involved in the present contract struggle.

Chairman of union-owned insurance company steps down

Robert Georgine, former official of the building trades union and chairman of the board of Union Labor Life Insurance Company (Ullico), agreed to resign from the board as the AFL-CIO seeks to bring an insider trading scandal at the union-owned insurer under control.

Georgine, who claims he did nothing wrong, along with 17 other union officials serving on Ullico's board, made \$6 million selling company stock at inflated prices and then adjusting the price downward. Georgine also profited in a separate Ullico stock deal that netted him \$6 million. The allegations were confirmed last month when an internal report was finally released which outlined the stock manipulations.

While Georgine resigned from the board, he has not given up his positions as Ullico's CEO and president. Opponents in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy say they will attempt to remove Georgine from those posts after a new election for directors on May 8. The AFL-CIO's interest in disposing of the scandal, which further underscored the parasitic nature of the labor bureaucracy, was hinted at when Sweeney commented last week, "It was important to put Ullico's difficulties behind us and show that labor is committed to high standards of corporate accountability."

Flight attendants union requests government action on SARS

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) sent a letter to Dr. Jon Jordan, Federal Air Surgeon of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) calling for an emergency order to protect flight attendants from contracting Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

Citing the recent case of a Singapore Airlines flight attendant who contracted SARS after working a March 14 flight between New York and Frankfurt, the AFA is requesting the government require airlines to provide attendants with non-latex gloves and masks when working flights to, from and within at-risk areas. At the very least, the AFA asks that flight attendants be permitted to wear their own masks and gloves without any discriminatory action being taken against them.

The letter points out that reports indicate SARS can be spread through inhaling infected droplets and by touching infected objects "such as a cup, meal tray, or seatback."

McGill teaching assistants on strike

Nine hundred teaching assistants at McGill University in Montreal went on strike late last week after over a year and a half of unsuccessful contract negotiations. The strike action was taken during final exams in what the union is calling a last resort measure.

Members of the Association of Graduate Students (AGSEM, FNEEQ-CSN), teaching assistants at McGill are among the lowest paid in the country and are asking for significant increases in salaries to bring them in

line with their counterparts in other provinces. Earning between \$14 and \$19 an hour with few benefits and no vacation pay, they are seeking increases of up to \$22 an hour. The last offer from the university was for a maximum wage of \$20.21.

Toronto public school teachers carry out job action

Teachers for the Toronto District School Board began a work-to-rule protest last week after being without a contract since last September. The action is the latest in a school year plagued with disputes resulting from the imposition of funding cuts by the provincial government that has set school boards across the province against teachers and their unions.

Although the Toronto Board has been in a legal strike position since February, the union representing teachers has elected not to mount any concerted challenge to the unpopular Tory government, instead favoring work-to-rule campaigns and similar limited protests. The Toronto action links up with a similar campaign by the Durham board north of the city and comes on the eve of province-wide tests and what could amount to a testing boycott across the province.

At the same time, negotiations between secondary teachers and the Toronto board have broken off and the union has asked the membership not to take attendance or do preparatory work outside of the classroom. Main areas of dispute include wages, class size and staffing guarantees.

Community workers locked out in Sault Ste. Marie

Over 400 community support workers in this northern Ontario town were locked out by Community Living Algoma on April 23 when they rejected a final contract offer recommended by their union bargaining committee earlier that day.

The workers are employed throughout the region caring for people with developmental and other disabilities, serving in a wide range of jobs from social workers and counselors, to cooks and cleaners. With an exceptionally large voter turnout, the membership strongly rejected the tentative three-year agreement that their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1880, sanctioned. While the union leadership has since attempted to gloss over the rebuke by the rank and file, it is clear that workers were angered by the omission of key job security provisions contained in the previous contract.

For its part, the company pointed to funding cuts from the provincial Conservative government as the reason for its intransigence. Although the union had indicated that workers would continue on the job despite the rejection vote, the company chose to lock them out.



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