

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 June 2003

## Colombian unions to strike against layoffs

Colombian union federations are organizing a national strike this Thursday to protest the closure of state-owned communications company Telecom, the reorganization of the national oil company Ecopetrol, and the Social Security agency. These measures will result in the sacking of 10,000 workers.

Colombian president Alvaro Uribe is implementing these measures as part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that requires the three agencies to operate at a profit.

Four thousand workers were sacked when the government closed Telecom on June 12, claiming that the company would have run out of money in six months. Company installations are currently occupied by troops to forestall plant occupations.

The government has announced that a new company will replace Telecom, but that only half the workers would be rehired. Also, on June 12, the government announced that the reform of the Social Security agency would force the layoff of 2,680 permanent workers and 2,100 contract workers. As a result, many Social Security offices and clinics are to be shut down.

Although Ecopetrol is profitable, in the name of greater efficiency the Uribe government plans to reduce the number of refinery workers. At present, the Ecopetrol refineries are occupied by army troops and closed to union workers.

## Thousands protest Brazilian president's economic reforms

More than 30,000 workers marched in Brasilia against the pension reform policies of Brazilian president Luis Inacio da Silva—"Lula"—on June 11. The Lula administration proposed raising the retirement age from 53 to 60 years for men and from 48 to 55 for women.

The workers also oppose the decision by the Brazilian Central Bank to raise interest rates to combat inflation by slowing down the economy and increasing unemployment. The government also plans to cut spending to reach a budget surplus, part of an agreement with the IMF.

With these measures, Lula is effectively abandoning election promises to create 10 million jobs during his administration through the "phenomenon of growth." For unemployment to even stay at the current level of 12 percent, GDP has to grow by at least 4 percent per year.

## Costa Rican teachers strike two weeks old

June 13 marked two weeks since Costa Rican teachers went on strike over changes in pension plans. The Labor Ministry intends to increase the number of years that educators have to work to qualify for a pension; pension checks would also be reduced under the plan. The changes would affect 8,000 teachers.

Costa Rican president Abel Pacheco has refused to weigh in on the dispute, claiming that the issue is in the hands of the courts, a

position rejected by the unions.

## Petroecuador workers on strike

Administrative employees at Petroecuador began a strike June 9 to protest the partial privatization of the government-owned oil company by opening up part of the industry to foreign capital. On June 13, management announced that oil exports would be down due to the impact of the strike. Ecuador produces 400,000 barrels of oil a day, the country's main export item.

Other issues in the strike include a wage increase and the demand that Energy Minister Carlos Arboleda be removed from his post.

## Striking Ayacucho teachers protest Peruvian president's visit

On June 12, Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo was booed during a stopover at the Ayacucho airport in southern Peru. About 1,000 striking teachers called Toledo a liar and yelled at him to leave Ayacucho. Riot-equipped police barred the teachers from reaching the terminal where Toledo's plane landed.

The Ayacucho teachers strike began May 12 over wages. The teachers rejected the government's offer of 100 soles (US\$28.57), an offer that was accepted by teachers in other parts of Peru, who went to work on June 12.

## Pennsylvania GE workers hold protest strike as national contract expires

Some 3,000 workers at General Electric's Transportation Systems plant near Erie, Pa., walked out for four hours June 13, beginning with the morning shift. The action emphasized their opposition to GE's plans to impose a greater burden of health care costs on the backs of workers. It occurred as the national agreement covering 24,000 GE workers expired midnight June 15.

The current agreement between the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers (UE) and GE bars an actual strike until June 26. GE is conducting separate talks with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IBEW-CWA), which represents about 13,000 of GE's workforce, mainly at plants in Louisville, Ky., Schenectady, N.Y., and Lynn, Mass.

According to a June 12 UE release, GE offered "meager" improvements in wages and a "modest" cost-of-living formula. But it described the health benefits package as a "horrendous insurance cost shifting" proposal. Back in January, 20,000 GE workers held rolling work stoppages to protest GE's announcement that workers would be made to pay for increased health care costs.

## California janitors vote to strike

Sacramento janitors voted 102-0 to launch a strike at midnight, June 16, to press their demands for increased wages and to win

health benefits for the first time. Janitors, who presently make US\$7 an hour, are paid well below the average US\$9 to US\$11 an hour earned by janitors in other California cities.

Workers rejected the building owners' health coverage proposal, which would only cover some 18 percent of the 1,000 Sacramento janitors by the end of a five-year period. The union was offering to phase the program in on the basis of seniority.

The contract covering about 1,000 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877 expired May 31 and was extended until negotiations with the Building Owners and Managers Association of Sacramento broke off June 12. Recently, the negotiations have been punctuated by two short work stoppages and demonstrations.

#### **Strike hits Kentucky telephone provider Alltel**

About 500 repair workers for the telephone provider Alltel walked off the job in eastern Kentucky after talks with Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 3372 collapsed last week. According to the union, Alltel's contract proposal would reduce workers' living standards by US\$2.11 per hour.

The company is demanding workers pay 25 percent of the monthly health insurance premium, while previously workers did not contribute. Alltel offered a 2 percent wage increase, which the union says does not offset the proposed health insurance costs. Workers are also seeking job security provisions, believing the company will use outside contractors to replace them.

The CWA offered to extend the current agreement but Alltel declined. The company is presently trying to recruit strikebreakers from other sections of its operations to replace striking workers.

#### **Women workers charge harassment at Denver mint**

Nearly a third of the women at the United States Mint in Denver, Colo., signed a complaint to the US Treasury Department that charges supervisors and male colleagues with sexual harassment and discrimination. The 32 women involved claim they were treated more favorably if they had sex with certain managers or were denied promotions and raises if they refused.

The workers initially made their objections to supervisors, managers and union officials. A meeting with a high management official in November 2001 was supposed to have initiated changes, "We never heard a word," said one of the mint workers.

The complaint will be taken up by an administrative law judge with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The petition does not seek a financial settlement but instead calls for an end to discrimination and changes in how complaints are handled. Other female mint workers have filed individual complaints.

#### **Brooklyn food workers win settlement on overtime pay**

About 200 workers at the Tuv Taam Corporation in Brooklyn, N.Y., will be awarded US\$860,000 for back pay and another US\$215,000 for damages after being denied overtime pay, according to the office of the New York attorney general. The company regularly forced workers to labor between 50 and 70 hours a week while denying them overtime. In addition, some of the workers were not even paid the minimum wage.

Tuv Taam is a kosher food service that provides salads and other items for supermarkets, schools and health care institutions.

#### **Air traffic controllers settle with Nav Canada**

Canada's 2,300 air traffic controllers ratified a new collective agreement with Nav Canada on June 10. The company accepted a federally mediated agreement supported by the union leadership of Local 5454 of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), thus ending a labor dispute of more than two years' duration. Throughout, the air traffic controllers have lacked the legal authority to strike, and any job action would have been limited to the refusal of training duties and the setting up of information pickets at airports.

The new four-year contract, effective retroactively to April 1, 2001, includes wage increases of 2.50 percent in the first two years, followed by 2.75 percent and 3.00 percent in the third and fourth years. Other gains include pension improvements and shift changes.

#### **Windsor van plant closes**

On Thursday, June 12, the Pillette Road plant of DaimlerChrysler Canada Inc. closed. The Windsor, Ont., plant, which manufactured Dodge Ram vans, employed 2,000 workers in two shifts. Because of "bumping rights," workers at DaimlerChrysler's minivan plant in Windsor will also be laid off. Local 444 of the CAW represents workers at both plants.

#### **Trade unionists assaulted outside Mississauga factory**

Last week, union organizers outside the Mississauga factory of Matrix Packaging Inc. were assaulted by representatives of the company. The organizers were handing out leaflets on public property adjoining the facility. At least one trade unionist suffered injuries as a result of the altercation.

The Union of Needle Trades and Industry Textile Employees (UNITE) is trying to organize the 220 workers at the factory, which manufactures small plastic bottles. In the course of the organizing drive, workers have received harassing phone calls and been threatened with dismissal. At least one worker has been fired for supporting union certification.

#### **Nova Scotia nursing home workers ratify contract**

Forty-seven workers at the Queen's Manor nursing home in Liverpool, N.S., have ratified a three-year contract. The deal will form the basis for subsequent negotiations by the 3,000 workers at 36 other nursing homes across the province. The nursing home workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The new contract, which will last until October 2004, includes a 2 percent wage increase in each year of the contract. It also includes a defined benefit pension plan and a commitment to create 300 new full-time positions.



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