

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 July 2003

Brazilian government workers strike

Government employees are in the second week of a national strike against the pension “reform” plans of the federal government headed by Luis Inacio da Silva, better known as “Lula.” Some 450,000 workers, half of all government employees, are participating in the walkout.

Union leaders have announced that, beginning on July 21, there will be rallies and protest marches every day. A national march will mobilize workers from across Brazil, culminating in a mass rally in Brasilia, the nation’s capital.

Brazil’s main labor federation, the Workers Central United (CUT), declared July 17 it would endorse and support the government workers strike if it appears that negotiations were at an impasse. The CUT is the labor federation most closely allied to Lula and his Workers Party (PT). So far it has refrained from mobilizing opposition to the government.

While thousands of workers rallied outside and booed its members, on July 17 the Brazilian legislature discussed a “reformed pension reform” plan as a compromise solution to end the strike.

The Lula administration insists that the pension plan is necessary to control the runaway costs of the public sector. The present system is \$24 billion in debt. Continuing cost overruns are expected to add \$70 billion more to that deficit in the next 20 years. The original pension draft would have reduced the deficit by \$17 billion.

The plan would increase the retirement age to 60 for women and 65 for men, up from the present 48 and 53. It would also require workers to help pay for their pensions by contributing for at least 35 years—or 25 years in the private sector—and would reduce benefits.

Mexican Volkswagen workers mobilize against layoffs

On July 12 thousands of VW workers took to the streets of Puebla to protest the company’s decision to sack 2,000 workers on August 1. The demonstrators warned they would go on strike if even one worker was laid off. The VW plant employs 10,500 workers.

Leaders of the Independent Labor Union of Volkswagen Mexico (SIVWM) charged the company is not being evenhanded by imposing the entire cost of low sales on the backs of the workers. They have suggested instead that the company agree to a shorter workweek—four days work and three days off—for the entire workforce, an effective 20 percent cut in workers’ wages.

Argentine railroad and subway workers protest

On July 15 workers at the Buenos Aires suburban rail service refused to collect fares or check tickets during the morning and evening rush hours. One day earlier Buenos Aires subway workers walked out during the afternoon rush hours, also over wages. Normal train operation resumed the following morning. What sparked both actions were wage agreements between the national union leadership and the transit companies, which were made behind the backs of the workers.

The Buenos Aires local of the Railroad Union (UF) declared it would continue protesting until management at Buenos Aires Trains (TBA) addresses the workers’ demands. TBA management issued a statement claiming it owes the workers no back pay and that management recently raised wages by 60 percent.

Public health doctors strike in Ecuador

Public health doctors in Ecuador have been on strike since July 7

demanding the government pay back wages and benefits included in their contract. In addition to those demands, the doctors are asking that all public health employees be covered by social security pension and health benefits and be granted a 35 to 50 percent raise.

United mechanics vote out machinists union

Mechanics at United Airlines (UAL) voted 5,234 to 2,997 to dump the International Association of Machinists (IAM) as their bargaining representative and instead join the craft-based Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). Another 5,000 workers declined to fill out ballots in the certification election.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* quoted one AMFA supporter as saying, “People are fed up, they haven’t done anything for us,” referring to the IAM. During the recent UAL bankruptcy, the IAM negotiated a 13 percent wage cut and conceded the company’s right to contract out work.

During the 1990s the IAM championed concessions at UAL in return for a stock ownership plan that was supposed to give workers a voice in the “employee-owned” company. As UAL spiraled towards bankruptcy last fall the stock plummeted along with it, ultimately becoming worthless.

In the 1980s and ’90s, airport ground workers at many major airlines—including clerks, customer service agents, ramp and baggage workers, mechanics and machinists—joined the IAM with the belief that the AFL-CIO affiliated union would advance their interests. Instead, the IAM bureaucracy used these new members to increase its own income and negotiate seats on the board of directors of the airlines, all the while selling out the interests of their members. AMFA has capitalized on this betrayal to convince machinists and mechanics to break away from other ground workers in order to cut a better deal with the airlines.

California construction drivers strike over part-time issue

The strike by cement truck drivers for Watsonville-based Graniterock widened to include operating engineers and paving workers by the end of last week, bringing the total to 80 strikers. The work stoppage erupted over the company’s demand to set up a pool of temporary drivers to substitute for vacationing union drivers. The temporary workers would not qualify for benefits unless they accumulated 60 days during a six-month period, something union members believe is unlikely.

The union is also seeking better wages and an end to co-payments on health insurance. The work stoppage presently includes members of Teamsters Local 912 in Watsonville, Local 287 in San Jose and Local 890 in Salinas. The strike could further widen should Teamsters at Graniterock’s quarry in Aromas and another facility in San Jose walk out.

Ohio social workers halt services

The 350 social workers, clerical and support staff who provide child protection services under the Summit County Children Services Board (CSB) walked off the job July 14 after management refused to extend their contract while negotiations continue.

Communications Workers of America Local 4546 had been pressing to cap the number of caseloads carried by individual workers, but without success. The union has pointed to instances where an individual social worker had to manage 73 cases in one month and another worker was given 43 cases in one week. The Child Welfare League of America has a recommendation that front-line caseworkers be given no more than 12 cases at any one time.

At a rally in downtown Akron on July 15, union President Robin Schenault offered to give up the demand for a caseload cap in return for management's agreement to abide by a blue ribbon panel's recommendation for reform of the CSB. The agency was on the receiving end of public indignation over the case of the "Kenmore Six," which involved the failure to identify the neglect of a girl and five severely underweight boys. The six were finally removed from their home after three of the boys were found by police wandering the street.

The CSB has offered a 4 percent wage increase, but only one-time lump sum bonuses for workers who have attained the top pay rate in their category. The union points out that about half of the bargaining unit's members are already at top pay. Since bonuses will not be added to the base pay of these workers, they will not qualify for higher retirement benefits. The CSB is also seeking to fold the present health care plan for Local 4546 members into the countywide health plan.

Ohio nurses strike over long hours

Nurses working for the Visiting Nurses Association voted by a 90 percent margin to strike the nonprofit agency, which provides home health care service to about 700 elderly patients on a daily basis in northeast and central Ohio.

The 120 members of the Ohio Nurses Association opposed the freezing of wages in the first year followed by a 3.5 percent wage hike in year two of the contract. Nurses were also insisting their hours be limited to no more than eight consecutive hours when serving on the triage unit, which provides 24-hour on-call assistance to elderly patients in their homes. Some nurses report logging up to 20 consecutive hours on the job.

In particular, the union asked for a 10-hour reduction in paperwork. Nurses complain that the heavy paperwork requirements tacked onto their jobs result in unpaid overtime. Management would only concede a four-hour reduction in paperwork.

Hawaii nurses end strike

Some 65 nurses at Wahiawa General Hospital ended their 11-week strike July 17 in Hawaii's longest nurses' strike. Nurses managed to hold health insurance premiums at the current percentage while obtaining an extra dollar per hour for workers with more than 10 years seniority. The final three-year agreement calls for total wage increases of 19 percent.

Wahiawa is a rural hospital and the only one that provides 24-hour service in an area between Ewa and Kahuku on the island of Hawaii. Strikers cited support from the local community as a major factor in their ability to hold out against management.

Michigan tannery workers strike

About 150 leather tannery workers in Rockford, Michigan walked out on strike July 17 after rejecting Wolverine Worldwide's final contract offer over job security and pension issues. Company management has inserted contract language into its proposal that would allow it to subcontract work or ship it to China.

Workers are also seeking an improvement in pensions. Under the old agreement, pensions ceased to increase in value beyond 30 years of seniority. However, many Wolverine workers have seniority between 30 and 44 years and receive no added benefits for their years of service to the company.

The 100-year-old Rockford tannery used to employ 500 workers. But when the company moved to automate the factory, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 600 collaborated with management in the endeavor, with the resulting loss of 300 jobs. Today, 80 percent of Wolverine's shoe production is contracted out to factories in China.

Postal union agrees to extend contract

A strike deadline set by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), representing 48,000 postal workers across Canada, was postponed July 16, the day it was set to begin. CUPW negotiators said Canada Post had improved in its contract offer and the union would continue bargaining as long as the employer showed good faith.

A strike could still go ahead if a deal is not reached early next week. Union leaders have said there are still major issues in the areas of wages, benefits and working conditions that would have to be worked out in a new deal. Canada Post, a crown corporation, is the seventh largest employer in the country with 24,000 outlets nationwide. The post office is seeking major concessions, such as the elimination of severance pay, rollbacks in the rights and benefits for temporary workers and reductions in job security.

Canadian postal workers, who last went on strike six years ago, have been without a contract since the beginning of the year. They were legislated back to work after two weeks during their last strike. The union has pledged to continue delivery of social assistance and government pension checks in the event of a strike.

Toronto transit workers threaten protest

The upcoming concert of the Rolling Stones on July 30 has set the stage for a confrontation between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) over limits on overtime that the employer is asking to be waived for the event.

In an ongoing dispute between the transit union and their employer, the union has refused this summer to grant permission to extend overtime limits beyond the legal limit of 60 hours. With hundreds of thousands expected to attend the concert, it may prove to be a transportation debacle even if the transit system runs at peak capacity. Although this was known in advance, municipal and provincial organizers were counting on bending the rules in mounting the show, which they hope will help offset the economic contraction in the province and Toronto, partly as a result of the SARS outbreaks this spring.

The TTC says that nearly 1,000 additional staff will be needed to service the concert and even if the union allows the additional overtime, the system can only move about 50,000 people per hour. TTC general manager Rick Ducharme has received tentative approval from the Labor Ministry to extend overtime beyond the existing limit but the union was not consulted. Ducharme has said that he will seek approval from the ministry to extend overtime limits permanently to 64 hours and to reduce time off between shifts from the current 11 to 8 hours.

Blood workers strike in Alberta

More than 80 workers employed at Canadian Blood Services went on strike last week in Calgary and Lethbridge, Alberta over wages and productivity speedup. The workers voted 95 percent in favor of a strike and to reject a mediator's recommendations.

The strikers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and work mainly in clinics collecting and distributing blood and blood products in some of the most efficient centers in the country. They have been without a contract since April 2002. Picket lines were set up in both cities last Thursday.



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