

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 August 2003

## Paraguayan street sweepers threaten strike

Asuncion street sweepers and refuse collectors who are being sacked by the municipal government threatened to strike August 3 and to protest August 15, the day the new president, Nicanor Duarte, is to be sworn in.

According to Municipal Union chief Maria Darmani, the city administration is to sack 850 of 4,000 workers. Some of the men to be fired have 20 years on the job. Darmani said the strike would last indefinitely and would include both street cleaning and refuse collection.

Asuncion Mayor Enrique Riera insists that this budget-cutting move is justified because there are too many street sweepers.

## Uruguayan public health workers announce strike

Uruguay's 4,200 public health doctors were to strike for 96 hours beginning August 11. At the same time, 15,000 health ministry workers will begin a strike of indefinite duration. The issue of the job actions is wages.

The health workers union denounced a "profound crisis" of the public health system, which is depriving Uruguayans of adequate health care. As part of the protest, public health workers announced they would take over the Viladerbo mental health hospital at midnight August 10.

The doctors are demanding a 2,000 peso raise, which would raise the average monthly salary to 5,800 pesos, or about US\$200.

Uruguayan unions are also planning a national strike on August 28.

## One-day strike in Chilean copper mine

Workers at Chile's La Escondida copper mine walked off the job August 8 over wages. The strike concluded that day when the union accepted a company offer that, though short of the workers' demands, improves benefits and provides a \$2,800 bonus.

La Escondida is the world's biggest copper mine. It has a capacity to produce 1.25 million tons of copper each year and employs more than 2,300 workers. Low demand restricted production to less than 800 million tons in 2002. The mine owner, Australian-British-Japanese consortium BHP Billiton, plans to produce 1.05 million tons this year. News of the strike caused an increase in the world price of copper of one cent to US\$0.82.

## Mexican cultural workers demand higher wages

On August 8, 1,200 employees of the National Art and Culture Council (CONACULTA) carried out a slowdown to press for a 5.8 percent increase in wages and benefits.

Jorge Izaguirre, leader of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE), declared that the Vicente Fox government has yet to grant increases that were originally due in January. He added that negotiations have broken down.

The SNTE is threatening to mobilize 200,000 of its members that

work supporting education across Mexico if the workers' demands are not addressed. A strike would shut down libraries, museums and cultural centers throughout Mexico.

Workers in that SNTE division earn US\$200 to US\$400 a month, not enough to cover basic needs.

## Public employees protest in Brazil

On August 6, thousands of public employees from across Brazil demonstrated in Brasilia against pension reform that would undermine their retirement benefits.

Public employees unions have accused President Luiz Inacio "Lula" de Silva of betraying his promises. "Lula, respect those that voted for you," chanted public employees. Public employees unions have traditionally lent support to Lula's Workers Party (PT).

The pension reform, which increases retirement age, degrades retirement benefits and taxes benefits of workers that are already retired, was approved as a constitutional amendment by Brazil's lower house on August 6, hours before the protest began.

Many of the protesters had traveled by bus for several days from the outlying regions of the country.

The government claims that Brazil's pension system for public employees has become too expensive, particularly under conditions in which Brazil's foreign debt is over US\$25 billion.

## County workers strike in California

Public sector workers in the California counties of Monterey and San Joaquin launched partial strikes last week to protest insufficient wage offers and the increased burden of health care costs. The actions are being provoked by the high cost of living in California and county government officials who are seeking to pass increased health care costs on to workers under the pressure of the state's budget debacle.

About 2,000 of 4,000 union members represented by Service Employees (SEIU) Local 817 in Monterey County held one-day strikes August 6 and 7. The strikes included hundreds of workers from the Natividad Medical Center and the county health department. Local 817 members, along with 400 county social service workers represented by SEIU Local 535, have rejected a 5 percent wage increase and the imposition of paying 10 percent of additional health premium costs.

On August 4 and 5 in San Joaquin County, hundreds of members of SEIU Local 790 struck a total of 11 county departments, including the courts and public health. County officials are strongly resisting the union's demand for a one-year agreement, which would create a situation where all contracts for county workers would expire next year. Meanwhile, on August 7 hundreds of Local 790 workers went on strike at San Joaquin General Hospital to protest increases in health care costs. One

worker told the *Associated Press*, “We pay almost \$200 a month for health care. If they increase it any more, it’s going to make it almost impossible to get health care for my family.”

### **Two more arrested in Northern Michigan hospital strike**

Police arrested two more residents of the community of Petoskey, Michigan on August 7 after they entered Northern Michigan Hospital and refused to leave until the facility’s administrators answered their questions concerning financial expenditures over the course of a nine-month nurses’ strike. Two other residents seeking the same information were arrested for trespassing on July 29.

Quinton Kuebler, one of the arrestees, told the *Record-Eagle* before entering the hospital, “I feel I owe it to the rest of the citizens to go in and try to get some answers from the board—where our health care dollars are going, and what they are spending them on.” A hospital spokesman responded, “We have never, we will not, and hospitals do not disclose this type of information.”

The arrests came as a blue-ribbon commission appointed by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm presented its findings to the governor concerning the strike. The commission heard testimony about poor quality of care at the hospital during the walkout. Nurses at the Petoskey facility joined Teamsters Local 406 in early 2002 seeking improved benefits and working conditions along with a say in patient care. In November of that year, the 474 nurses went out on strike after the hospital refused to address their grievances. Presently, about half of the nurses continue to walk picket lines.

### **Washington State building contractors take aim at ergonomic rules**

The Building Association of Washington spent \$350,000 to hire professional canvassers to obtain 258,411 signatures in order to assure a November ballot initiative that aims to repeal the state’s ergonomic rules.

In 2000, the Department of Labor and Industries issued new rules that attempted to reduce injuries caused by repetitive motion, heavy lifting and workstations that impose poor working positions. An immediate court challenge prevented the rules from ever taking effect. An attempt to repeal the rules through the legislature failed earlier this year.

Building Association President Randy Gold declared, “The ergonomics regulations are an unnecessary job-killer.” The real issue for contractors is to secure profits, regardless the threat to the lives and safety of workers.

### **Labor board rules in favor of Tyson**

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Tyson Foods Inc. did not bargain in bad faith with the union at its Jefferson, Wisconsin processing plant. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 538 had charged the company’s policy of offering union workers their jobs at \$9 an hour while advertising the same jobs among strikebreakers at \$10 was regressive bargaining. The NLRB ruled that Tyson had presented legitimate reasons for the discriminatory policy.

About 470 workers walked off the job back in February after the company insisted on a four-year wage freeze, a cut in starting pay from US\$11 to US\$9 an hour, a cut in base pay from US\$13 to US\$11 an hour, vacation for highest seniority workers to be cut

from six weeks to four weeks, gutting of the health care plan and an increase in workers’ portion of health care premiums, and a freeze on pensions and implementation of a 401(k) plan.

The strike in Jefferson involves the first walkout at one of the plants acquired by Tyson from IBP. Tyson, long the dominant force in chicken processing, used the 2001 acquisition to move into pork and beef processing and is seeking to lower living standards to the level of workers in the chicken industry.

### **Mediator appointed in negotiations at B.C. ports**

A federal mediator has been appointed to conduct talks between British Columbia’s 454 dock and ship foremen and the province’s port authorities. The mediator’s appointment temporarily averts a strike that could have begun as early as August 12—the end of a 21-day cooling-off period imposed in mid-July.

Talks are set to resume August 18. Both sides have agreed to a wage increase of 12.8 percent over 51 months, but are yet at odds over hours of work, leaves of absence and retraining provisions after layoffs.

### **Safeway workers engage in rotating strikes**

Cashiers and clerks at 49 Safeway groceries stores across B.C.’s lower mainland and the Fraser Valley have been engaging in rotating strikes since last Wednesday. The 4,700 workers were briefly locked out by the company the previous Tuesday evening. The stores were reopened coincident with a new offer from the company.

The rotating job actions will continue until the company’s latest offer is put to a membership vote. Outstanding issues include wages, benefits and seniority. The workers are represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1518.



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