

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 September 2003

## General strike follows two weeks of protests in Uruguay

On August 28, the government of President Jorge Battle confronted its sixth general strike; Uruguayan workers walked out in support of the struggle of public health care workers, on strike since August 10. The strike was organized by a coalition of two labor federations (PTI-CNT).

The general strike was almost totally effective among teachers and state employees, and only partially effective among private sector workers. In addition to the health workers' demands, striking workers also demanded wage increases in their own industries.

All along, the Battle administration has insisted that the government cannot afford to pay a US\$68 increase in monthly wages to 13,000 health workers and 4,200 doctors.

## In anti-IMF protest, Honduran workers block major roads

On August 26, hundreds of trade union members blocked the four major highways that are entry-points into Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital. They set up barricades of burning tires and denounced the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the same time, in solidarity with the marchers, 60,000 educators, doctors and nurses walked off their jobs and stayed out for 24 hours. Three other simultaneous protests were carried out by native groups.

In downtown Tegucigalpa, riot police assaulted a demonstration of thousands, leaving more than 20 protesters injured. President Ricardo Maduro threatened to "bring the full weight of the law" on the protest organizers.

The Popular Resistance Block (BRP), a coalition of 25 unions and professional organizations, organized the protest. The IMF and the Maduro government are about to come to an agreement that paves the way for the privatization of water services and freezes teachers' and public health wages in return for a US\$1 billion loan.

In a television interview, Maduro said protests were not necessary since the IMF had come down from an earlier demand that the government lay off 10 percent of all public employees and freeze wages for two years.

Currently, Honduras is in an economic slump and unable to service its US\$5 billion debt due to the fall in world prices for its main exports, coffee, bananas and shrimp.

## Housing Institute workers strike in Mexico City

Four hundred and forty-seven workers at Mexico City's Housing Institute (INVI) went on strike last week. INVI is in

charge of a massive program of public housing construction. INVI workers make about 4,000 pesos a month (about US\$400) and have no medical benefits, vacation or seniority rights.

The strikers are demanding an eight-hour workday (down from the present nine hours), assistance to working single parents, a housing program and short- and long-term loans. INVI management has rejected out of hand the establishment of a housing program for its own workers; instead it has appealed to the courts for a recount of the strike authorization vote.

On August 26, INVI workers marched and rallied in Mexico City, demanding that the court reach a quick decision and that their demands be addressed.

## São Paulo autoworkers threaten to begin a "festival of strikes"

São Paulo autoworkers are demanding a monthly minimum of R\$1200 (US\$400) and a 36-hour workweek with no loss in pay. Union leaders are warning that an unfavorable reaction from management could result in a "festival of strikes" across the Brazilian auto industry. Currently the monthly minimum is R\$600.

The workers are also demanding that outsourcing of work be pre-approved by the auto union.

## Hawaiian transit workers strike continues

Oahu Transit Services called off talks over the Labor Day weekend, guaranteeing a continuation of the strike by 1,300 transit drivers that began on August 26. Teamsters Local 996 has scaled back its proposal to include a first-year wage freeze followed by 50-cent wage increases in the second and third year of a new agreement.

Oahu Transit, a private company that operates the transit service connecting Honolulu with the rest of the island, claims it has withdrawn its "38 take-backs" that included layoffs for the workforce, but the union charges the company's moratorium on layoffs will only last for one year. Local 996 has said its members are prepared to sustain the transit strike for up to three months.

Honolulu mayor Jeremy Harris has positioned himself behind transit management, declaring, "There will be no money for pay raises for the Teamsters." Harris has purposely crafted his request for transit money to deny workers wage increases.

## California home-care workers engage in civil disobedience over poor pay and benefits

Home-care workers rallied outside the Fresno County offices August 29 to demand higher wages and benefits for the

county's 11,000 caregivers. At the conclusion of the rally, 20 workers sat down to blockade entrances and were each cited by sheriff's deputies with two misdemeanors and later released at the county courthouse.

Dan Simon, a union organizer for Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 250, charged that vast numbers of elderly and disabled in Fresno County went without care, ultimately forcing people into nursing homes where they die.

After more than one year of negotiations, the county unilaterally imposed a 75-cent raise bringing wages for home-care givers to \$7.50 an hour, but refused to discuss benefits or other issues. The SEIU has filed charges with the California Public Employment Relations Board alleging the county failed to engage in good-faith bargaining.

#### **Meat-packer fined**

The state of Washington has ordered Tyson Foods to provide rubber boots to workers at one of its meat-packing plants in Walla Walla County and fined the company a mere \$500 for forcing members of Teamsters Local 556 to stand in blood and excrement without protective footwear. Previously, the company required workers to pay \$60 for protective boots.

Tyson was also fined \$61,500 for what was termed "willful violations" of state safety rules after a worker lost his arm in a machine. The company is presently appealing an earlier court ruling that ordered it to pay Walla Walla workers \$7.1 million for time spent (for which they were not paid) putting on and taking off protective equipment.

Tyson, which has dominated chicken processing, acquired the Walla Walla meat-packing plant in 2001 from IBP as part of its move to spread its monopoly into all aspects of meat processing.

#### **Inco strike ends with new agreement**

The 13-week-old strike by 3,300 workers at Inco was brought to an end last week when workers voted to accept a new contract worked out between their union, the United Steelworkers of America, and the Canadian nickel giant. The three-year deal was passed by just over 60 percent of workers who voted, leaving deep divisions among their ranks over the handling of the strike.

Details of the contract will not be released until union members have had a chance to review them, but key bargaining issues were around wages, pensions and health benefits. The strike began on June 1 of this year and the new contract will run until June 2006. Inco has in fact benefited from the strike, which analysts say has been in large part responsible for the rise in nickel prices over the summer because of the reduced world supply. It is estimated that it will be two weeks before the company returns to full operations.

#### **Union launches boycott against mushroom producer**

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has launched a boycott of Rol-Land Farms in Kingsville, Ontario, to protest hazardous and appalling working conditions

and to bring pressure on the Ontario Tory government to grant unionization rights to farm workers.

The company employs 270 low-waged workers at its facility in southern Ontario and produces packaged mushrooms under various brand names. Workers are often required to work 12-hour shifts with very few breaks. A union spokesperson compared the conditions to "a 19th century coal mine." Farm workers in Ontario were denied the right to collective bargaining by the Tory government of Mike Harris in measures that have faced numerous legal challenges from unions.

Despite the fact that more than 70 percent of workers at Rol-Land signed union cards, they are awaiting an official ballot count by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB), which has been delayed pending an OLRB hearing. Since the boycott was announced last week, Rol-Land Farms has posted notices threatening to lay off 40 workers identified by name if the boycott "impacts in any way on Rol-Land production." The boycott will nevertheless proceed on schedule beginning September 1 across Ontario, according to the union.

#### **Wal-Mart thwarts union in Manitoba**

Poised to become the first Wal-Mart outlet to form a union, last week's vote count at the Thomson, Manitoba, store returned a narrow defeat for the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, which has been fighting there for a first contract. The narrow vote against of 61 to 54 ended hopes for an inroad against the notoriously anti-union retail giant. While there is a remaining dispute over who should have been included in the vote, Wal-Mart has taken a number of actions, which would prevent any new vote for the near future. One hundred and fifty workers voted in June on union certification, but the vote had been stalled by company maneuvers including intimidation tactics and job reclassifications to disqualify some workers in the voting.



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