

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 September 2003

Oil workers strike in Brazil

Oil workers employed by the state-owned oil company Petrobras went on a 24-hour “warning” strike September 10 to demand wage improvements. This was the first strike by oil workers against the government of Luis Inacio “Lula” da Silva.

The oil workers are demanding a 22.3 percent raise—15.5 percent to account for skyrocketing inflation between September 2002 and August 2003 and a 6.8 percent as compensation for increased output. Petrobras management has offered a 6 percent raise.

Union leaders warned of a strike of indefinite duration if the workers’ demands are not addressed.

Health workers to sue former Mexican president

Members of the National Union of Health Workers (SNTS) will take former President Jose Lopez Portillo to court on September 16. The workers charge Portillo with unlawful arrests, beatings and tortures of union representatives and employees of the General Hospital in Mexico City during a strike 25 years ago.

On July 21, 1978 members of the right-wing paramilitary White Brigade and the Mexican police, all dressed as civilians, arrested over 150 striking workers, many of whom were tortured during the next two days. The White Brigades have recently been exposed as responsible for hundreds of forced disappearances of political opponents of the regime. A recent investigation by the government of Vicente Fox documents executions, rapes, kidnappings and tortures carried out by this group.

The suit is part of a campaign to unearth the events of that era of political repression. Other participants include a dissident teachers union (CNTE) and the Electrical Workers Union. Former President Lopez Portillo claims to have no knowledge of disappearances and tortures during his regime. “I was a president, not a policeman,” he declared. Portillo has criticized Fox for launching the investigation.

Brazilian post office workers strike

A strike by 20,501 postal employees began September 12 and quickly spread out across Brazil. The strikers are letter sorters and letter carriers. The workers are demanding a 70 percent increase in base pay, higher meal vouchers and parity with operating technicians. Currently a letter carrier earns a monthly income of 395 reais, (US\$136). In comparison, a technician earns R\$860. Management offered a 4 percent increase and workers rejected the offer.

According to the postal workers union, the 1980s base pay for letter carriers was the equivalent of five times the minimum wage, while today it is equivalent to the minimum wage. Post office management has cautioned the workers that unless they temper their demands the system may be privatized.

Rally to back Yale strikers

Ten thousand workers and students rallied in New Haven, Connecticut on Saturday, September 13 in a show of support for the nearly 4,000 workers on strike against Yale University. The rally lasted about four hours, tying up traffic in the downtown area.

Hundreds of demonstrators sat down and locked arms in the middle of the Yale campus, leading to the arrests of 148 participants.

In a transparent attempt to generate some credibility for the national AFL-CIO, union federation President John Sweeney was charged by the police with blocking traffic and taken away in plastic handcuffs. In recent weeks Democratic politicians, including Jesse Jackson, have also been arrested in such publicity stunts.

Earlier in the week, a group of ministers in the area accused Yale of engaging in racist strikebreaking tactics. They claimed the university brought in replacement Latino workers to create ethnic strife by parading about 50 of them in front of the mainly African-American workforce in Local 35. The clergyman said that less than 5 percent of Yale workers are Latino, but make up 20 percent of the population in New Haven.

Yale has refused to state how many replacement workers it has hired. However, on September 12, 13 of them quit their jobs to support the strike and have joined the union picket lines. Many of them have told the press that when they were hired by Sanitary Maintenance they had no idea that the jobs were only temporary and that they were being used as scabs.

Meanwhile, novelist Alice Walker, who wrote *The Color Purple*, refused to cross a picket line and canceled a scheduled lecture at Yale. The union has been attempting to convince all special guests to cancel their appearances at the university.

According to one report, the two sides have made some progress in negotiations on the issue of job security, but remain very far apart on the issue of wage hikes and pension benefit increases. The strike conducted by Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant International Union, representing clerical and maintenance workers, began on August 27.

Long Island University: one strike ends, another continues

The faculty strike at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University ended September 11 as the union leadership, representing 550 full- and part-time professors, sent teachers back to work after agreeing to a tentative contract. The proposed settlement calls for salary increases of 2 percent in the first year and 4 percent in each of the following two years. It also calls for a decrease of workloads from teaching four courses a semester to three beginning in one year.

However, the union was unable to achieve a seniority system or provide better health benefits for adjunct faculty members. Remaining unresolved is the university’s proposal to reduce health coverage for professors hired in the future, thereby creating a two-tier health care benefits system.

The 315-member faculty at the C.W. Post campus, unable to achieve a settlement, went on strike September 8. The teachers are rejecting the university’s salary hike proposals as inadequate. They also oppose LIU’s attempt to increase their workload and force all teachers hired after September 2004 to pay half the cost for the health care for family members. The university is also seeking to eliminate an indemnity

plan for all teachers.

Oklahoma company accused of denying foreign workers' rights

Lawyers representing 52 undocumented workers from India charged a now-defunct Oklahoma manufacturer with "human trafficking for labor" before a federal judge. The John Pickle Company of Tulsa, which manufactured specialized equipment for the oil industry, brought welders, pipefitters and electricians from India as "trainees" and paid them \$2 to \$3 an hour.

The workers charge they were promised US wages and would be provided with apartments. Instead they were housed in dormitories and told they could only leave the company's property under escort.

Lawyers for the workers are seeking to establish that their clients were not trainees but full-time employees. If proved, they will seek back wages and damages based on US minimum wage standards. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission also accused the company of discrimination and has merged its complaint with the workers' lawsuit.

Tentative agreement in teachers' strike against Catholic Church

Union negotiators and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, which operates 22 high schools in Philadelphia and its environs, reached a tentative agreement September 12 after teachers concluded 11 days on the picket line. Neither side in the negotiations revealed details of the agreement that covers 1,026 members of Local 1776 of the Association of Catholic Teachers.

Teachers rejected the Archdiocese's first offer of annual pay increases of \$900, \$1,200 and \$1,400 by a 669-231 margin. Workers say that hikes in health care premiums in the second and third year would have wiped out any gains in wages. Just one week ago the union's executive board rejected an offer that kept raises for teachers with less than 26 years seniority equivalent to the initial offer while giving teachers with seniority above 26 years annual increases of \$1,400, \$1,400 and \$1,600. The union has been seeking across-the-board increases of \$1,200, \$1,400 and \$1,500.

The typical teacher in the Philadelphia Archdiocese has 20 years experience and makes \$38,000, while a starting teacher is paid \$30,300 and the highest pay for a teacher with a doctorate is \$59,030.

Teamsters honor bakery workers' picket line

Members of Teamsters Local 519 have honored picket lines for 68 locked-out bakery workers at the White Lily Foods plant in Knoxville, Tennessee. Members of Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 165 have been on the picket line since July 24 after negotiations for a new contract broke down.

White Lily demanded that workers' health care costs be increased from 10 to 20 percent while only offering a 25 cent wage increase. Last week, police arrested Local 165 President David Woods, charging him with criminal trespass. A spokesman for White Lily told the media that Woods threatened to shoot a security guard, a charge Woods denied. White Lily makes a variety of bakery items for fast food companies, such as Hardees, McDonalds and Waffle House.

House bill proposes repeal of Davis-Bacon Act

Representative Marilyn Musgrave, Republican of Colorado, is proposing legislation that calls for "market" wages for federally funded roads projects by repealing aspects of the Davis-Bacon prevailing wage protections.

The Davis-Bacon Act of 1931 set standards for road construction that bar contractors from undercutting local wage standards, pensions and family medical coverage on federally funded highway projects. Musgrave claims her bill, H.R. 2672, will save the federal government between 5 percent and 38 percent in construction costs. The proposal

presently has 60 co-sponsors, among them, Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

BC grocery workers set to strike

With the rejection of the company's final offer last week, 4,700 workers at the retail food giant Safeway in British Columbia are poised to go on strike midnight September 21. The workers are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), which issued a warning to the company to return to the bargaining table or face strike action.

The union represents cashiers and grocery clerks at 49 Safeway outlets across the lower mainland of the West Coast province that have been without a contract since the end of March. Workers voted 98 percent in favor of strike action last April and rejected the latest contract offer over a month ago. The main issues in the dispute center on wage disparities within the unionized workforce as well as benefit provisions. In the last contract the union accepted wage differences of over 100 percent between workers in the same union ranging from the legal minimum of \$8.50 to \$21 an hour.

Ontario farm workers get boost in union drive

A recent ruling by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) has opened the door for the ballots of workers at Rol-Land farms in Southwestern Ontario to be counted to determine whether they will get union representation.

270 low wage workers at the mushroom production facilities of Rol-Land in Kingsville, Ontario applied for certification with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) last June and a vote was held in early July. That vote count was delayed by legal maneuvers taken by the company and the union has hailed the recent decision as a victory. It is expected that further legal obstacles will emerge as the union is seeking to set a precedent for agricultural workers in the province in defiance of new laws brought in by the current Tory government, disallowing farm workers the right to unionize.



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