Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 September 2003

Argentine unemployment protest

In Buenos Aires, pickets blocked the Pueyrredon Bridge, which provides access to this city from the south, protesting the lack of progress in the investigation over the killing by police of two protesters, Dario Santillan and Maximiliano Kosteki 15 months ago. Kosteki's sister Vanina denounced the appointment to head the investigation of officials who took part in the police riot that was the backdrop to her brother's execution on June 26, 2002.

In downtown Buenos Aires, supporters of the Federation of Land and Housing rallied at the municipal office of Social Benefits demanding an end to hunger and decent jobs, housing and health services for the poor.

In Rosario, unemployed workers fought the police across the street from the court building, demanding justice over the deaths of two youths.

Conflict in Panama continues over privatization of social security

Panamanian unions have threatened to organize a general strike of indefinite duration to demand an end to privatization plans for social security and to demand the rehiring of fired social security director Juan Jovane. Workers are also concerned that the government will seek to increase the retirement age and eliminate benefits. According to some experts, the system is near bankruptcy and close to collapse.

On September 25, more than 3,000 workers, mainly construction laborers and educators, marched through Panama City, two days after a 24-hour general strike of construction workers, teachers and nurses. Following the strike, the government of Mireya Moscoso called for a dialogue with the unions.

Brazilian autoworkers prepare to strike

Autoworkers employed by Volkswagen in the São Paulo suburb of Sao Bernardo will take a strike vote this week to demand a 20 percent wage increase. The workers have rejected a proposal by Volkswagen management to lay off 4,000 workers. Management has threatened to fire striking employees at two São Paulo plants. Bernd Pischetsrieder, VW's executive president, made the threat on September 23 from the company's headquarters in Wolfsburg, Germany.

Bolivian workers demand president resign

The Bolivian Workers Central (COB) will conduct a general strike of indefinite duration to demand the resignation of President Gonzalo Sanchez. A COB spokesman declared that the unions consider Sanchez an incompetent ruler who must leave office. The COB is making no demands other than that Sanchez leave.

Public employee unions protest wage law in Ecuador

About 2,000 government workers and high school and university students confronted the police in Quito on September 25 during a demonstration against draft legislation that seeks to reduce wages, benefits and severance payments to laid-off workers. Police attacked the protesters with tear gas as they marched on the Congress. The draft is to be voted on this week. The unions have vowed to launch a strike if the Congress passes the legislation.

Ship owner retaliates against fish-processing workers with mutiny charges

Premier Pacific Seafoods, owner of fishery ship operating in the Bering Sea off Alaska, has filed a countersuit against protesting workers, charging them with mutiny, which under maritime law could result in prison terms of up to 10 years.

After leaving the Seattle, Wash., port at the beginning of this year, some 220 mostly Latino workers aboard the Ocean Perch were confronted with the demand to work an extra half-hour a day in addition to the grueling 16 hours for which they had originally contracted. Workers also found they were required to process as many as 1.7 million pounds of pollock daily with fewer people than in the past. On January 27, 25 of the workers issued a letter to their foreman protesting the expanded hours and asked to have the 16-hour day restored, concluding, "We are all more than willing to pull together to see that no one has to work more than 16 hours in a day."

When management ignored their plea, the workers issued a second more blistering letter on February 2 signed "the voice of the people." That letter complained it was "not fair" for "office management to just be sitting around when we can't have enough time to rest, and be ready for the next day." It demanded a response by the following day. A standoff ensued and the 25 workers were finally put ashore in Dutch Harbor, Alaska.

None of the 25 workers can now get jobs on other ships. The workers are suing Premier Pacific Seafoods in court for back wages and have asked the National Labor Relations Board to assist them in getting their jobs back.

Service and grounds workers strike university in Ohio

Maintenance, cafeteria and grounds workers struck the University of Miami at Ohio on September 26 demanding higher wages and better benefits. The 860 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 209 rejected the college's last offer, which included a wage increase of 4.25 percent in the first year with additional 3 percent wages in the subsequent two years of a three-year contract.

The union charges that some of its workers receive as little as $7.73 an hour. The university itself admits that more than half of the workers make less than $10 an hour. Wide support was evident from students, faculty and staff, and other workers when strikers set up picket lines outside Saturday's football game between Miami and the University of Cincinnati. Many offered signs of support and words of solidarity along with donations.

"These people have been taken advantage of way too long," Doug Brooks, a professor in the university's department of teacher education, told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. "If they just took the money they screw these kids out of on parking tickets, they could give everybody a $2 raise now."

Long Island University strike ends

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The 19-day faculty strike at the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University (LIU) ended September 26 as union members unanimously ratified a three-year contract. The settlement was reached shortly after the university administration threatened to cancel classes and lay off the teachers if they did not return to work. The administration also threatened to dock the faculty one day's pay for each day of the nearly three-week strike, which averages out to $3,600 for each striker, a sum that is greater than what the teachers were fined in their previous walkout.

The accord provides for raises of 3 percent this year and 4 percent for each of the next two years. It also provides for a more uniform workload—all professors must teach three courses a semester instead of the four that some of the faculty members were compelled to teach. However, the teachers must now pay more for their health insurance benefits in the second and third years of the agreement.

One of the union negotiators referring to management's threats said that "some people were scared, especially those who are non-tenured." The union represents 340 full-time faculty members, 37 percent of whom do not have tenure.

The day after the university administrators made their threats, and before the union members voted to accept the settlement, hundreds of students rallied to show their support for the striking teachers. There are more than 12,000 full-time and part-time students enrolled at the campus located in Brookville, N.Y. A separate faulty strike at the Brooklyn campus of LIU ended on September 11, three days after the strike at C.W. Post began.

Nevada gold miners picket stockholders meeting

One hundred gold miners from mines in Elko, Nev., traveled 750 miles to the annual Denver Gold Forum, attended by stockholders and other potential investors of the Newmount mining company, to protest the failure of management to settle a contract dispute that has dragged on for a year.

The 980 members of the Operating Engineers Local 3 have been without a contract since September 30, 2002. Last July, workers voted down a contract that offered an 8 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement. Workers are most opposed, however, to the company's attempt to drastically overhaul rules governing overtime, seniority, the workweek structure and the contracting out of work. Management is also seeking substantial changes in pension and medical benefits.

Bush appointees to Amtrak board foreshadow breakup and privatization

President George Bush's proposed nomination of three new members to Amtrak's board of directors foreshadows the administration's support for breaking up the national passenger rail system and selling off its most profitable parts to private industry.

Among the nominees is Louis S. Thompson, who retired earlier this year from the World Bank. Thompson began his career at the Transportation Department and played a role in creating Amtrak. At the World Bank, Thompson spearheaded successful efforts to privatize railroads in Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Romania; he also played a role in similar efforts to privatize railroads in China, India and Russia.

The second nominee is Robert Crandall, who retired from the chairmanship of American Airlines parent company AMR in 1998. Since then, Crandall has served on several boards, including Halliburton, the company formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney. The last nominee is Floyd Hall, a long-time Republican fundraiser and former executive of companies such as Singer Sewing Machine Co., the Grand Union Co. grocery chain and KMart.

Quebec day-care workers stage walkouts

The first of four one-day walkouts was held last Friday, September 26, by 6,000 day-care workers across the province to protest treatment by the new provincial Liberal government that took office last March.

The unionized workers, who are employed at 300 non-profit day-care centers across Quebec, are represented by the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), which has invited non-union workers to join the protest. The union is trying to pressure the government to abide by pay equity provisions agreed to by the former Parti Quebecois (PQ) government. While the government has offered wage increases of 2 percent and improved vacation pay, the union says that it is unduly delaying agreement on other matters including arbitrary pay scales that were to have been settled last June. The government has pleaded that the issue will take more time and that everything is going according to schedule.

The workers are charged with caring for over 32,000 children in the province, most of which are in the Montreal area. The next one-day strike is scheduled for early October.

BC forest workers' strike on hold

Despite the expiration of a strike notice served last week, no action has yet been called by the Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA), which represents 12,000 loggers and millworkers in the coastal regions of British Columbia. The workers had voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action following the collapse of contract talks in August. At least three of the major companies affected have sought to extend the existing contract amidst massive restructuring underway in the industry. The workers are fighting for improvements in wages, pensions and job security.

A number of workers staged a rally at the recent union convention in Kelowna to protest an agreement proposed by the union executive and have called for the resignation of the union president, Dave Haggard. Haggard has had to discourage workers from taking independent action outside of union sanctions, saying he is hopeful that talks will resume soon.

BC union foists concessions contract on grocery workers

Rotating strikes at 49 Safeway stores in the lower mainland of British Columbia have been halted with the acceptance of a new contract for 4,700 clerks and cashiers at the grocery giant. The union conceded on the central issue of job classifications and has kept workers split between two separate locals in the same outlets. Claiming victory, an official at the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), said, "We are not happy with the wage and benefit increases we got, but when you look at where we were eight months ago with the company trying to obliterate the collective agreement, we are happy we've prevented that from happening." The new contract gives a 35-cents-an-hour wage increase annually in a four-year contract along with small signing bonuses.

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