

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 October 2003

Brazilian autoworkers union surrenders jobs to Volkswagen

Brazilian autoworkers employed at two plants in Sao Paulo gave in to management's demands and accepted the loss of 4,000 jobs. VW claims it must cut 16 percent of its Brazilian workforce due to slumping cars sales, which have fallen by 10 percent this year.

Jose Lopez Feijoo, president of the Sao Paulo state autoworkers union, declared the agreement a victory, since VW agreed to provide either three years severance pay to workers that resign voluntarily, or retrain them.

The union managed to obtain a "yes" vote on the deal at the Sao Bernardo plant, where VW will slash 2,000 jobs. The plant currently employs 13,000 workers. Another 2,000 jobs will be cut at the Taubate Plant, one-third of the workforce. Workers have not yet voted to accept the union's sellout.

Sao Bernardo is the center of Brazil's auto industry. Twenty years ago VW employed 60,000 workers there, but by 2001 the number had been reduced to 16,000.

General strike in Bolivia: Thousands march in La Paz and Potosi

Tens of thousands of workers, students, farmers and small business owners marched and rallied in La Paz and in Potosi on September 30, the second day of a national strike called by the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) to demand the resignation of Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. The protesters denounced worsening economic conditions in South America's poorest country, where two-thirds of Bolivia's 8.3 million people live on less than two dollars a day and wages and employment have remained stagnant for two decades.

Opposition has galvanized against an IMF-dictated plan to export natural gas to the US from southeastern Bolivia, which holds South America's largest natural gas reserves. Currently the planned route of a \$5 billion pipeline would go through Chile or Peru, to Mexico and the United States. Opponents say Bolivia would earn just 70 cents for each 1,000 square feet of gas exported, less than half the current amount earned from gas exports to Brazil.

COB President Jaime Solares led the march. He demanded the rescinding of the pipeline project and the resignation of

the president. President Sanchez has refused to resign, taking advantage of divisions within the COB and resting on support from the army and the United States.

Many workers at the demonstration demanded higher wages and protested worsening social conditions. Small business owners opposed recent tax increases.

So far, the national strike has had spotty success across the country. However, sections of the ruling elite are reported to consider Bolivia ungovernable and on the verge of civil war. Inhabitants of the land-locked nation's highlands (the "Altiplano") have called for secession from the rest of the country and coca farmers have blocked highways in the highlands surrounding La Paz and those leading to Chile and Paraguay. Violent confrontations are taking place with army units sent to clear the roads.

Mexico: Massive protests on anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre

Some 50,000 protesters marched through Mexico City October 4 to mark the 35th anniversary of the massacre at Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square. Relatives of the victims, many holding giant photographs of the deceased, led the march.

On October 2, 1968 the Mexican army and police ambushed a demonstration of students from rooftop positions. The official death toll, 37, is considered by human rights groups to be less than one tenth of the actual number killed.

There is little dispute of the facts of the incident. Thirty-five photos sent anonymously to the correspondent in Spain of the Mexican magazine *Proceso* confirm that several hundred snipers of an elite police unit—the Olimpia Battalion—had been given orders to shoot at the students. The battalion was acting under the orders of the interior minister, Luis Echevarria, who became Mexico's president in 1970. Neither Echevarria nor any other official has ever been brought to trial over the killings.

Chicago sanitation workers voting on refuse companies' ultimatum

Union officials called on Chicago's 3,300 striking sanitation workers to reject the "last, best and final offer" from the Chicagoland Refuse Haulers Association in a ballot conducted last Sunday.

The association, which represents the city's 16 companies who are contracted to haul the city's garbage, is offering a \$6.15 hourly increase in wages and benefits over the course of a five-year contract. Teamsters Locals 731 and 301 have been seeking \$6.55 in hourly wage and benefit increases over the same period. Teamsters spokesman Brian Rainville said of the association's proposal, "It's just a bad offer," and indicated it was deficient both in the areas of health coverage and wages.

The Refuse Haulers Association said it was "logistically impossible" to maintain service using supervisors and nonunion labor during the strike, which began October 1. The strike affects garbage collection in all of Cook County and parts of six other counties.

Pennsylvania school board rejects mediator proposal, presses for bigger cuts

The school board for the West Chester Area School District, west of Philadelphia, rejected a mediator's proposal and is insisting on deeper cuts in the ongoing strike by teachers in the district that serves 11,600 students.

Mediators have refused to reveal the details of their proposal, which was agreed to by union officials for the West Chester Area Education Association. The school board, led by its president Rogers Vaughn, is demanding teachers switch to a cheaper health-care plan and pay annual step-wise increases for health care costs of 6, 8 and 10 percent. They also want to limit raises for teachers to 3 percent, which is below what mediators proposed.

University of California teachers assistants strike statewide

Graduate students launched a statewide one-day strike October 3 to protest the refusal by University of California officials to negotiate in good faith. The 13,000 graduate instructors, teaching assistants, readers and tutors work in the nation's largest public university system, comprised of eight undergraduate campuses.

University of California officials are calling the strike "illegal," pointing out the past contract has a no-strike clause. UAW Local 2865, which represents the strikers, justified the strike arguing it has 50 unfair labor practice charges pending against the university.

The university is determined to remove from the contract the right of graduate student workers' to participate in sympathy strikes with other unions.

Cancer cases against IBM to proceed

A Superior Court judge in California ruled that the case of two former IBM workers who allege their sicknesses resulted from exposure to dangerous agents in the company's San Jose microchip assembly plant during the 1970s and 1980s could proceed.

Alida Hernandez was diagnosed with breast cancer and

underwent a mastectomy just two years after retiring from IBM. James Moore continues to suffer from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. They charge IBM doctors were aware that a considerable number of workers were dying from rare cancers throughout the 1930s, '40s and '50s and knowingly exposed them to cancer-causing chemicals such as benzene and arsenic.

The case is only the first of 250 lawsuits that have been filed against IBM by workers in Silicon Valley, New York and Minnesota. The court also dismissed cases filed by another IBM worker as well as the children of Suzanne Rubio, an IBM disk assembler and inspector who died of breast cancer at age 37. The cases of Hernandez and Moore could begin as early as October 14.

Talks break down in AECL strike

No new talks are scheduled in the strike by 550 nuclear scientists and engineers at Atomic Energy of Canada, Ltd. (AECL). The workers have been on strike for over three weeks, demanding increased wages and job security. They are seeking a wage increase of 16 percent over two years. The latest offer by the company was for 12.1 percent over two years.

The company, which produces the CANDU nuclear reactor, recently laid off 135 employees. The workers, represented by the Society of Professional Engineers and Associates, engaged in rotating strikes in August, to which the company responded with lockouts.

New Brunswick government employees strike

A wide range of New Brunswick government employees went on strike midnight, October 2, demanding higher wages. More than half of the 530 striking workers are designated "essential services" and are denied the right to strike. Instead of a picket line, the strikers will volunteer at nursing homes and community centers across the province. The workers, whose contract expired last December, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 1251.

Manitoba bus drivers end strike

Thirty-two bus drivers in Manitoba's Prairie Rose school division will return to work October 6. The drivers had been on strike since September 15 and are represented by Local 4458 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. According to a union news release, the workers won an unspecified wage increase but were not able to win any improvements to the pension plan.



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