

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 November 2003

Peruvian strikers demand jobs

Fifteen thousand public health doctors went on strike November 17, joining 10,000 court employees who struck November 4. The doctors are demanding that the government health care budget be dramatically increased, from less than \$600,000 to \$ 1.1 million, that wages be raised, and that wage inequities be addressed.

Meanwhile, there is no end in sight to the three-week-old judiciary strike. The workers presented 41 demands to the government, including wage increases and changes in working conditions.

Also protesting are public employees who lost their jobs due to the privatization of public services under the presidency of Alberto Fujimori. About 300,000 were sacked, of whom 30,000 have yet to be compensated. On November 19, in a dramatic protest, about 10 workers pierced their arms with needles at a public rally to call attention to their demands.

Bolivians demand compensation for victims of government violence

Relatives of the 59 people killed by the army and police during the mass demonstrations in October have set up camp across from the Presidential Palace in La Paz, demanding the government charge former president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in criminal court for having massacred their family members. In addition to those killed, 411 demonstrators were injured. President Lozada was forced to resign because of the protests.

Fifty of the protesters are on a hunger strike. The protesters are also demanding \$15,000 in compensation for each person killed. Government authorities have offered less than half as much. Another group is on hunger strike in El Alto, near La Paz, the city where most of the killings took place.

Public employees strike in Chile

Public sector workers carried out a one-day strike on November 18 to protest the government's wage offer. The 65,000 workers are demanding a 7 percent raise; the government, citing the need for fiscal "discipline," has offered a paltry 2.2 percent.

Ecuador government: "No money for teachers"

In response to an ongoing teachers strike that began November 18, Ecuador's education minister, Otton Moran, declared that the government has no money to grant raises. Moran wants educators to accept a postponement of the raises. The teachers went on strike to protest the government's refusal to carry out a June agreement that ended a 28-day strike.

Ernesto Castillo, president of UNE, the teachers union that represents 120,000 strikers, announced that the workers intend to escalate their job action. He pointed out that the teachers enjoy the support of native and rural groups that could barricade the nation's highways.

Oil workers protest in Argentina

Oil workers in the northern province of Salta confronted police in the vicinity of the city of General Mosconi on November 20. The workers, former employees of the YPF oil company, are engaged in a struggle to recover from losses resulting from the privatization of YPF. Some 3,000 workers are owed around \$20,000 each. The company has offered to settle with the workers for about one-third that amount.

On November 2, YPF workers blocked the entrance to Rapsor's Campo Duran refinery. Police, who staged a provocation by arresting seven of the picket leaders, broke up the protest. Outraged oil workers marched on the company's offices in General Mosconi and on Tecpetrol, across the street.

Refinor, partially owned by the Spanish Repsor-YPF, operates the Campo Duran refinery that processes Argentine and Bolivian crude oil and natural gas for the depressed domestic market. Italian-owned Tecpetrol is an exploration and drilling company, a much more profitable sector of the industry.

The General Mosconi region has been the scene of repeated clashes between workers, management and the government beginning in 1997. Five workers and two bystanders have died in clashes since then.

IBM cover-up of hazardous working conditions

Testimony last week by two former IBM managers revealed a corporate strategy to control workers' knowledge of a possible toxic environment in the company's San Jose, Calif., disk-drive manufacturing facility. Audrey Crouch, a former IBM occupational nurse, testified that IBM managers instructed nurses to never say that toxic chemicals caused factory workers' illnesses.

Instead, to deflect attention from working conditions, nurses were to interrogate workers about possible non-work-related causes such as allergies, alcohol and fatty food consumption—"everything but where they worked and what type of chemicals they had used." When asked whether she had ever documented possible work-related exposure of ill workers to chemicals, Crouch said, no, "because I would have been terminated."

Another IBM manager, Arthur Diaz, testified that during managers' meetings, top IBM managers instructed him and others to tell workers complaining of illness that plant conditions were safe. Diaz told the court the policy was in place during his management tenure from 1981 to 2000.

Both witness, testifying on behalf of two former San Jose IBM workers who allege their cancer was caused by working conditions, said IBM was afraid of "mass hysteria" if workers became aware of the dangers of toxic chemicals. "They didn't

want everyone to claim being sick of the same thing and close the production line,” Crouch said.

Pennsylvania students launch solidarity protest to support striking professors

Students at Lincoln University in Chester County, Pa., blockaded campus entrances on November 21 to protest the administration’s “sweat-shop wages” for its professors. Student body president Nosakhere Griffin-El told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “The student body is very upset that our administration won’t give our faculty what they need. Right now, our faculty are getting sweat-shop wages. We could possibly lose our good faculty.”

Hundreds of students took part in barricading five entrances to the campus. The four-hour demonstration was punctuated by the arrest of three students for disorderly conduct when they banged on the hood of a campus security vehicle after it struck a demonstrator.

The 93 full-time faculty members, represented by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), launched their strike on November 7, but returned to classes on November 10 to await the results of mediated talks. Professors returned to the picket line on November 18 when the university agreed to an overall package of \$1.5 million over four years, compared to the union’s demand of \$1.7 million,

Florida teachers’ union leader awaits sentencing

The longtime head of the Miami-Dade County local of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is awaiting sentencing on corruption charges. The union leader cut a deal in August with federal prosecutors that set the loss from fraud and tax violations at \$650,000. The deal paves the way for a likely two-year prison sentence for Pat Tornillo, who headed the 30,000-member union in the nation’s fourth-largest school district for four decades.

The American Federation of Teachers issued an audit estimating Tornillo stole \$2.5 million in Miami-Dade union money. While teachers in his local went without raises for the last two years, Tornillo, long trumpeted as a great “liberal” by the establishment, collected a \$228,000 annual salary and indulged in excesses such as a \$71,430 cruise to Southeast Asia on a luxury liner, four trips to the Caribbean island of St. Barts, an African safari, and jaunts to Australia, Greece and Brazil. A \$758,000 Gulf of Mexico island vacation home was sold to cover restitution and fines from his deal with prosecutors. His wife also received some \$400,000 in union money that was spent on a personal assistant and other items.

As Tornillo awaits sentencing, enraged teachers have signed a form letter to the sentencing judge calling the deal between Tornillo and federal prosecutors “a mockery” and a “token slap on the wrist.” Miami-Dade school board attorney Johnny Brown has speculated that the Tornillo deal may be aimed at closing the case and preventing a more thorough investigation that might reveal even wider corruption.

B.C. Forestry workers on strike

Six thousand loggers and sawmill workers in the coastal forestry industry of British Columbia went on strike last Friday and were joined by another 2,000 workers on Monday. The action also idled 4,000 non-unionized workers and now involves virtually the entire forestry workforce in B.C., affecting at least 25 sawmills and the majority of logging operations in the province.

The strike by the Industrial Wood & Allied Workers of Canada (IWA) came in response to a ruling by the Labour Relations Board (LRB) upholding drastic cuts in working conditions imposed by industry employers. The ruling was in response to a filing of complaint by Forest Industrial Relations (FRI), the bargaining agent for 45 forestry companies affected by the strike, over a one-day walkout by 5,000 forestry workers on November 6. That action was to protest the rejection by the FRI of the union’s most recent contract proposal. The ruling gives employers the right to arbitrarily impose terms of employment. They immediately cut an estimated 15 percent from labor costs, eliminating premiums for graveyard and weekend shifts, as well as payment for travel time, and imposed a range of reductions in benefits and working conditions. These terms are to remain in place until a new contract settlement is reached.

Over the last two decades, the number of unionized workers in the B.C. forestry sector has shrunk from about 33,000 in the 1980s to just over 8,000 today. Employers say they need to cut 30 percent from labor costs to remain competitive, but the union leadership faces fierce resistance to concessions by workers. The IWA initially asked workers to remain on the job, but were forced to call the strike to contain outrage over the LRB ruling. The two sides have been in contract talks since April and restarted negotiations on Tuesday.

Montreal transit strike ends

The strike by 2,050 maintenance workers employed by the Montreal Transit Corporation (MTC) ended on Sunday when workers voted to accept a new contract between their union and the city. Workers went on strike November 16, shutting down most public transit in the city with the exception of some weekend and nighttime service required under essential service provisions.

The main issues in the strike were pension provisions as well as wages. The MTC had offered wage increases totaling 8.7 percent over four years, which were rejected by the union. No details are yet available on the new deal. Transit service began to return to full operation on Monday.



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