

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 November 2003

National strike in Dominican Republic

Violent confrontations with the police took place on November 11 in Santo Domingo, Santiago and other cities in the Dominican Republic during a 24-hour national strike. Eight people are confirmed dead, more than 100 wounded and 750 arrested.

Unions and student groups had called the strike to protest government austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to demand that the administration of President Hipolito Mejia act against rising transportation, health care and public utility costs.

In exchange for a \$1.2 billion loan from the IMF, the World Bank and the InterAmerican Development Bank, the government agreed to submit the country to strict economic discipline. The purpose of the loan was to offset the effects of the collapse of the Dominican Republic's second largest bank, an inflation rate of 35 percent and a depreciation of the peso from 20 to 40 per US dollar. Many areas of the country are without electricity because the government is unable to pay subsidies to utilities.

The Council of Unified Transportation Unions, which organized the protests, has threatened more job actions and protests if its demands are not addressed.

Mexican Sugar workers cancel strike, accept a 3.9 percent raise

Mexico's sugar workers' union cancelled strike plans and accepted a 3.9 percent raise for its 45,000 members, down from the 8 percent it had initially demanded. The raise will push salaries marginally above the 3.8 percent increase in consumer prices expected in 2004. The strike against 59 Mexican sugar mills had been set for November 16.

The union had demanded timely pension payments, as well as company-provided housing; however, those issues remain outstanding. Seven years ago, management had promised 15,000 homes for workers. None have been built so far.

Mexican producers find it difficult to compete against lower-cost US corn syrup, even though the government of Vicente Fox—a former executive for Coca-Cola—has protected sugar by imposing a 20 percent tax on soft drinks containing corn syrup. The US protects its sugar industry with prohibitive tariffs on Mexican sugar.

Ecuadorian public school teachers on strike

On November 10, Ecuadorian public school teachers announced that a strike of indefinite duration will begin on November 18. The dispute is over the government's continued refusal to fulfill campaign promises to raise teachers' wages. The National Educators Union (UNE) represents 120,000 educators.

The government insists that there is no money to increase school budgets or teachers' pay, and is under pressure from the

International Monetary Fund not to give in. The IMF demands that the government of President Lucio Gutierrez set money aside to service and reduce the country's sizable foreign debt, in essence by placing the cost of the debt on the backs of teachers and public sector workers.

One-day strike at Oregon bookstores

Workers at Powell's Bookstores in Portland, Ore., staged a one-day strike last week to protest unfair labor practices during their current contract negotiations. Two hundred Powell's workers, members of the International Longshoremen's Union Local 5, were joined by at least 200 supporters at Powell's main bookstore. Among them were longshoremen from Portland and Vancouver, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Service Employees Union and the Inland Boatsman's Union.

ILWU Local 5 was established four years ago to represent the bookstore workers. Its first contract took 11 months to conclude. The present agreement covering 400 bargaining unit members expired October 2. Counting the main store, there are seven Powell's stores in the Portland area and a thriving Internet business. At least two other Portland stores, the warehouse and a store in nearby Beaverton were picketed. Powell's claims to be the largest bookstore west of the Mississippi River, with its main store occupying an entire city block.

The union charges Powell's with seven violations of US labor laws. The most serious involve singling out and harassing union activists.

The company has arbitrarily changed rules on the use of e-mail and attempted to discipline one member of the negotiation's team with one day off after he appeared at a negotiation session without the proper paperwork requesting time off. The paperwork had been filled out, but apparently lost by management. The company only revoked its decision on discipline after 63 workers marched to the corporate office in support of their negotiator.

The one-day strike is to be followed up by informational picketing. A strike of longer duration has been threatened for the day after Thanksgiving should there be no movement toward a settlement.

Indiana utility strike ends after shutdown threat

Workers at Citizens Gas & Coke Utilities in Indianapolis, Ind., ended their strike November 12 after the company's president threatened to shut down the facility if workers didn't accept management's original offer. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1400 declined to release voting results from either the ratification vote or the earlier strike vote.

Company president David N. Griffiths sent a letter to each of the 251 strikers that said, in part, "If the union does not vote to ratify this labor agreement, we have no choice but to shut down."

Workers rejected a 2 percent pay increase along with a \$550 signing bonus, charging it was too little following 3 ½-year wage freeze and an earlier concession contract. The production of coke at Citizens has been affected by lower-cost imported coke from China and the decline of US steel and metal manufacturing.

Decertification vote in Michigan nurses' strike disputed

Some 500 registered nurses involved in a yearlong strike at Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey took part in a decertification election on November 13 aimed at removing Teamsters Local 406 as bargaining representative. While a tally of undisputed votes resulted in 178 cast to remove the Teamsters and 136 to retain the union, several disputed votes remain uncounted. Hospital management challenged 136 nurses who cast votes, and the Teamsters have challenged 29.

According to the Teamsters, hospital management's main objection used to challenge votes was "abandonment of job," referring to the fact that many strikers obtained jobs at other hospitals during the yearlong strike.

The nurses voted to join the Teamsters in 2001 by a vote of 213 to 185. No negotiations have been held since the nurses first walked out over working conditions and concerns over patient treatment. For its part, the Teamsters union has left the embattled nurses mostly isolated.

Maintenance workers strike Ohio cereal plant

Some 50 workers in the maintenance department of Ralston Foods' Lancaster, Ohio, plant went on strike November 12 after the International Union of Operating Engineers and company management failed to reach an agreement. Mediated talks continued after workers hit the picket lines, but neither side has disclosed specifics on bargaining.

Last May, 191 non-union workers voted to join Local 18-S of the Operating Engineers in a National Labor Relations Board-supervised certification vote. The present negotiations cover workers who are involved in their third contract struggle.

Pennsylvania nurses strike over long hours

Nurses at Medical College of Pennsylvania (MCP) in East Falls went on strike November 11 against mandatory overtime, charging the hospital with understaffing. "Frankly, money isn't the issue," Sue Roxandich, one of the 271 strikers, told the *Philadelphia News*.

Pickets claim the hospital is short 75 nurses. Even MCP management admits they have a shortage, although they put the deficit at 60. The result is that nurses are compelled to work extra hours in addition to the standard 12-hour shift, with as little as one hour of advance notice.

Rotating strikes by Newfoundland grocery store workers

Fifteen hundred workers at Dominion grocery stores across Newfoundland have begun rotating strikes in support of their demands for higher pay and seniority. The workers voted 99 percent in favor of a strike and have rejected the company's latest offer, which included a wage increase of 85 cents an hour over three years, as well as a signing bonus. The workers, mostly cashiers and clerks, are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers. The Murphy Square Dominion in Corner Brook has been the first location to be picketed.

Strike continues in Wadena School Division

Striking support workers at Saskatchewan's Wadena School Division will hold a shelter-warming party on Friday, November 21, to mark their 100th day on the picket line. The workers have been on a full-scale strike since August 25, following a period of rotating job actions that began April 9. Most of the workers are part-time workers, and they are demanding more full-time positions, wage increases, and optical and dental benefits, as well as wages for holidays and in-service training days.

The workers have been without a contract since December 31, 2000. In late October 2003, the school board and the workers' union (Local 3078 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees) met for the first time since conciliation talks in spring. Talks broke off, however, when the school board demanded the dismissal of seven employees at the Quill Lake elementary school. The seven workers had just been reinstated to their positions by a labor board ruling which declared that failure by the board to rehire the workers constituted an attempt to coerce or intimidate striking support workers.

The board has justified its refusal to bargain on the grounds that the new Lakeview Division school board will take over in January 2004.

Telus prepares to hire scabs

The Telus Corporation of Alberta and British Columbia, which recently laid off 6,500 workers, has sent a letter to retired managers indicating that in the event of a strike a third-party firm would be engaged to hire an "augmented management team" to do the jobs normally done by striking workers. The 10,700 workers at Telus, represented by the Telecommunications Workers' Union, have been without collective agreement since November 2000. On November 14, the two sides entered a 60-day period of conciliation talks.



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