

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 December 2003

Protests against US trade policy in El Salvador

Thousands marched through the streets of San Salvador December 12 protesting ongoing trade talks between El Salvador and the United States. The massive demonstration consisted of peasants and workers. Students and workers are also occupying the National University.

Police blocked the march as it tried to present a petition to President Francisco Flores at his residence. The protesters insist that what is being worked out behind closed doors is not a free trade treaty arrived at by two sovereign nations, but an arrangement worked out in advance by US-based transnational firms to loot El Salvador's wealth and further impoverish its population of 6 million.

El Salvador is a major coffee producer and is suffering from the world collapse of coffee prices.

Public health doctors strike in Chile

Chile's Medical College—the professional association of doctors (CM)—declared on December 8 that its members would engage in a national strike on December 16 and 17. The strike follows a work stoppage in Santiago in early December.

At issue is the government's health policy. CM rejects government proposals, included in the so-called AUGE Plan, to privatize medical care in Chile, limit poor people's access to health care, and lower doctors' wages.

CM president Juan Luis Castro said doctors would seek support from other unions. In addition to the repudiation of the AUGE Plan, CM is demanding that Health Minister Pedro Garcia resign. Garcia is a strong backer of AUGE.

Violent protests in Haiti

On December 12, opponents and supporters of President Jean Bertrand Aristide clashed in cities across Haiti. Three died in Goncalvez, and there were reports of at least one person killed in Port-au-Prince. Opponents of Aristide are demanding he resign, calling him a corrupt dictator. Protests against Aristide by students, educators and unemployed youth have been escalating across this impoverished nation since October.

On December 11, a crowd of thousands of students, professors and their supporters led a massive demonstration in Port-au-Prince against Aristide. Police fired tear gas and warning shots at demonstrators, while Aristide supporters, who have been given virtual carte blanche to harass government opponents, tossed rocks. One bystander was killed by gunfire, while two students were shot and three others sustained cuts.

Aristide was elected president in 1990, but was prevented

from taking power by the military. In 1994, a US invasion restored Aristide to power. He left office in 1996 and was reelected in 2000. The legislative elections of 2000 were rife with fraud and have been the source of bitter conflict since then.

Eighty percent of Haiti's population of 8 million live in dire poverty; 66% are unemployed. An ongoing AIDS epidemic has lowered life expectancy at birth to 51 years.

Bank workers in Brazil denounce layoffs

The National confederation of Bank Employees (CNB) announced December 11 in São Paulo the launching of a campaign to stop the sacking of bank employees. CNB officials say that so far this year, 7,000 bank workers have been laid off as banks rationalize their operations.

"The outlook for 2004 is worse," declared CNB president Vagner de Freitas.

According to a CNB report, Bradesco, Brazil's largest private bank, is about to sack 12,000 workers, nearly 20 percent of its 66,000 employees. Also planning layoffs are HSBC (the second largest bank), ABN-Real/Sudameris and Santander/Banespa.

The union is calling for a national work stoppage of bank employees on December 18.

Workers strike Ohio metal manufacturer

Metal workers struck the Cambridge, Ohio, plant of Shieldalloy on December 8 after six months of fruitless bargaining. The 68 members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4836-02 have been working under company rules and poor safety conditions since the expiration of their contract on June 6.

In November, four workers were injured when a furnace exploded. At the time, Senior Vice President Hoy Frakes Jr. brushed off the incident saying, "We are hotter than melting steel, and when you have components like this mixing, sometimes an explosion is not unheard of."

Striker Richard Wilson told the *Times Recorder*, "We've been told to run equipment we're not trained on, we're told to work in conditions that no one else would even want to work in, which are extremely hazardous and we're made to work overtime and then not get paid. We shouldn't have to be doing that. Some of us call it working in a death dome."

Shieldalloy, a division of Metallurg Vanadium, has hired International Management Assistance Corp. (IMAC) to supply the company with strikebreakers and a security force for the duration of the strike.

Teamsters extend pickets in strike against Emery/Menlo Worldwide

The Teamsters have extended picketing to the Los Angeles area in a dispute involving Emery/Menlo Worldwide employees in San Jose, California. The union says the air freight company violated its labor agreement by subcontracting work out to non-union businesses.

In May, the company fired 50 union workers at its San Jose center and shifted work to non-union operators. The current contract, which is in force until March 2005, requires negotiations over any farming-out of union work. Teamsters Local 287 had been in discussions with management in an effort to secure the rehire of the laid-off workers and indicated the company had agreed to resolve the issue. However, the agreement submitted by Emery/Menlo Worldwide last week did not address the problem.

Portland hospital workers vote to strike

After rejecting the company's latest contract offer, hospital workers in Portland, Oregon, voted by a 70 percent margin December 9 to authorize a one-day strike against Legacy Good Samaritan Hospital. The strike is set for December 22, pending a new offer by management.

Among the issues that have separated the two sides, which have been bargaining since June, is affordable health care for hospital workers. The 250 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49 include certified nursing assistants, emergency department aides, patient services associates, physical therapy aides, anesthesiology assistants, central sterile technicians, dietary clerks, radiology aides, transport associates and food production workers.

Supermarket strike ends in Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia

The nine-week strike by 3,300 Kroger grocery workers in Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia ended December 11 after workers ratified a new contract with the Cincinnati-based supermarket chain. The agreement between management and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) increased the company's annual contribution to health benefits by \$3 million over the initial pre-strike offer of \$9 million.

Workers will lose the previous open insurance system, however, that offered the option of visiting the doctor of their choice when the switch is made to Blue Cross/Blue Shield. The wage offer remains the same as the earlier rejected offer. Workers will receive 20- to 25-cent raises in the first and third years, with lump sum payments of \$300 to \$500 in the second and fourth years.

Striker Evelyn Robertson told the *Associated Press*, "I've been working there for 11 years, and I'm still part-time. I only make \$8.65 an hour now, and if this passes, I'll only be making \$9.05."

Kroger also owns the supermarket chain Ralphs, which is one of the three chains involved in the Southern California grocery strike.

Public supports striking workers in Wadena School division

On December 9, the school board in Saskatchewan's Wadena school division was compelled to organize an open meeting in which the public passed resolutions in support of striking school employees. The 80 school support workers have been on strike since August 25 for more full-time positions, wage increases, wages for holidays and in-services, and additional benefits. Among the resolutions adopted by the meeting were calls for the resignation of the school board's chair, the removal of the director of education and the firing of the board's chief negotiator.

Although the school board was required by the Education Act to organize the public meeting, it is not required to recognize any of the resolutions passed there.

The workers are represented by local 3078 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been without a contract since December 31, 2000. In the coming week, the Labour Board is to rule on two allegations of unfair labor practices against the school board—which will be amalgamated into the new Lakeview Division school board on January 1, 2004.

Strike by Women's Shelter workers ends

The strike by 10 workers at the Autumn House Women's Shelter in Amherst, Nova Scotia, has come to an end, with the workers ratifying a tentative agreement. They will return to work on December 22.

The strike began August 11 after the shelter's management cancelled the existing collective agreement and refused to negotiate a new one. Management had been demanding that employees work 12-hour shifts, was seeking changes to the center's "outreach" model, and was asking for concessions in the employees' long-term disability plan. Behind the employer's intransigence was the Tory provincial government, which has recently made cuts to the funding of the shelter system.

In addition to opposing management concessions, the workers, represented by Local 4326 of the CUPE, were seeking a 9.3 percent wage increase. Union statements indicate that the settlement leaves the center's outreach model intact and that the 12-hour shifts have been withdrawn, but do not indicate to what extent the workers' demands for a wage increase have been met. The settlement includes a take-back mandating worker co-payment of benefits.



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