

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Explosion at rally injures Argentine jobless**

An explosion at a rally by thousands of unemployed Argentine workers December 21 in Buenos Aires injured 21 people. The action had been called to mark the two-year anniversary of mass protests that forced the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa.

Demonstrators beat drums and waved flags as they marched around the presidential palace. It was the largest protest since Nestor Kirchner, the current president, came to power last May.

Police Chief Eduardo Proados said that a large fireworks device likely caused the blast, though this has not been confirmed.

## **Contract deadline at Chuquicamata mine in Chile**

Contract negotiation between 6,600 miners and Codelco, the government-owned copper company, are in their final stages. If the six unions involved in the talks reject management's final offer, a strike could begin January 2.

Codelco is the world's largest copper producer and the Chuquicamata mine is its largest operation. Unions are demanding a 6 percent base salary increase while management to this point has offered only 2.65 percent. It initially offered just .35 percent.

The company has been stockpiling a portion of its production over the past year in the face of slack demand. However, in the wake of the recently concluded strike at Codelco's Andina mine, copper prices have risen. As a result, Codelco says it will soon begin selling off part of its stockpile.

## **Philadelphia hospital closed after month-long strike**

Tenet Healthcare Corporation announced it will close the Medical College of Pennsylvania (MCP) in Philadelphia, terminating hospital services on March 31, 2004. The decision came in the wake of a tentative agreement before the Christmas holidays involving a month-long strike by the hospital's 271 nurses.

Nurses had been fighting Tenet's attempt to impose mandatory overtime, reduce benefits for nurses on weekend shifts and bar nurses any voice in staffing decisions. The closure will ultimately result in the loss of 800 jobs.

Tenet claims MCP was losing over \$5 million a month. The company, which is the second-largest hospital chain in the United States, lost \$519 million during the first nine months of 2003. In the company's third quarter filings with the US Security and Exchange Commission, it reported finalizing the sale of six hospitals in October and is expected to close another five by the end of 2003.

## **Gas workers strike Indiana utilities**

Gas workers in central Indiana voted to strike December 23 after contract talks between Vectren Corporation and both the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and United Steelworkers unions collapsed. The 359 workers rejected the company's previous offer on December 12 and have been working under an extension of the old agreement that expired December 3. No new talks have been scheduled.

According to Vectren management, their four-year proposal contained yearly wage increases of less than 3 percent and health care premiums that would require workers to contribute between 12 and 16 percent of the cost. The unions have not publicly commented on contract negotiations.

Workers involved in the walkout install gas meters and repair and lay pipe. Vectren provides natural gas and electricity to more than 1 million customers in parts of Indiana and west-central Ohio. The company reported earnings of \$67.1 million for the third quarter of 2003.

## **Immigrant workers protest in Arizona**

Nonunion construction workers picketed the construction site of the Mesa Arts Center in downtown Mesa, Arizona to protest the safety and working conditions imposed on them by JD Steel, a Phoenix-based company that provides concrete reinforcement services for the construction industry.

The workers, all immigrants of Mexico, said JD Steel

will not provide them with insurance, breaks, vacation and decent pay and has been fighting their attempts to organize under the Iron Workers union. “They don’t respect human rights,” picket Felipe Hernandez told the *East Valley Tribune*.

Iron Workers Local 75 had filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board on March 4 of this year charging JD Steel with threats, intimidation and unlawful discharge. One month later, however, the union withdrew the charge before the NLRB began investigations.

### **New York union official charged with multi-million dollar theft from city union**

The bookkeeper for District Council 37 in New York City was arrested December 22 and charged with stealing \$2.4 million from the union, which he used to buy as many as 16 apartment buildings. Lloyd Clarke, who is charged with the crime, worked for more than 20 years for Local 375, which represented the city’s architects and engineers.

Clarke used a scheme that involved writing checks to a Bronx real estate company that he owned. Clarke carried on the theft from July 1996 to July 2003, when the union discovered irregularities after hiring an auditor. Clarke’s present real estate holdings, which include 11 apartment buildings, are estimated to be worth more than \$7 million.

### **Ottawa taxi unions threaten unified strike**

All three unions representing Ottawa’s taxi drivers and 47 dispatchers (Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canadian Auto Workers, United Food and Commercial Workers) pledged their support December 22 to dispatchers who are preparing for a possible strike or lockout. With the present contract expiring December 31, the strike date has been set for New Year’s Eve night.

The key demands of the dispatchers are a salary increase and benefits. On average, a taxi dispatcher working for Zip Track, the company that operates the cabs, earns \$9 an hour and has no benefits. Since Zip Track took over Ottawa’s taxi industry two-and-a-half years ago, dispatcher wages have remained stagnant while the workload has been constantly increasing, despite consolidations, the introduction of technology and expanded service.

Taxi drivers of Blue Line and Capital Taxi, members of CAW and UFCW, have been distributing leaflets to their patrons urging them to write to Zip Track President and CEO Hanif Patni and demand an end to poverty wages for taxi dispatchers.

### **Alberta government threatens jail if nurses strike**

According to a recent statement the provincial Tory

government of Ralph Kline is threatening to jail nurses if they go on strike. The nurses, represented by the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA), have been threatening walkouts if a deal can’t be reached. Alberta’s Public Service Employee Relations Act prohibits strikes and lockouts of workers in public services, including nurses.

Registered nurses in Alberta have been in negotiations with the provincial health authorities for nine months over 130 proposed rollbacks in nursing conditions and health care. The rollbacks include cutting guaranteed time off for part-time nurses, giving health employers the power to move nurses from site to site at will and permanent night and evening shifts.

The mediator appointed by the provincial government has made recommendations for a new contract that are almost identical to the proposed rollbacks. No Alberta public employee has ever been jailed for an illegal walkout; the harshest penalty yet has been a \$200,000 fine imposed on Alberta Union of Public Employees in 2000.

### **Saskatchewan ruling condemns board in school strike**

The Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board (LRB) ruled December 19 that the Wadena School Division has violated the Trade Union Act by failing to bargain in good faith. The board has ordered the school division to resume contract negotiations with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) until they reach a collective agreement and also ordered them to develop a plan to compensate the striking school workers for lost wages during the three-month period it was refusing to bargain.

Eighty school support workers from eight schools at Saskatchewan’s Wadena School Division, represented by CUPE, have been on strike since the end of August for more full-time positions, wage increases, wages for holidays and in-services and additional benefits. On January 1, the Wadena School Division will be amalgamated with two other divisions and a new school board will take control of contract negotiations.



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