

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 January 2004

## **Argentine bank workers strike**

Workers at Argentine foreign banks struck December 31 to demand higher wages. Before walking out the bank employees dumped tons of shredded documents out of windows onto the streets of Buenos Aires.

On December 30, hundreds of bank workers staged protests and briefly occupied the offices of several banks, including US-based Citibank and Spanish-owned Banco Frances.

Workers called on the banks to honor a government decree raising wages by US\$75.70 per month. The Argentine Banking Association, which represents foreign-owned banks, denounced the protest, claiming the salary increases have already been implemented.

## **Five out of six unions ratify pact at Chilean copper mine**

Members of five unions at the Chuquicamata copper mine in Chile have voted to ratify a new contract providing for a 3.15 percent wage increase. The mine employs 6,100 and is the largest operated by the state-owned copper producer Codelco. Workers had originally sought a 6 percent wage increase.

A sixth, smaller union representing 300 workers voted earlier to reject management's offer and is set to strike January 6. However, the strike is not expected to have much impact if the other unions do not respect picket lines. One union official told the press that his members will be told to continue on the job if the smaller union walks out.

A major strike would have had a significant impact on world copper supplies and negotiations were being closely monitored by commodities traders. The mine produced 597,000 tons of copper last year.

## **Union cuts off strike pay to Michigan tannery workers**

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 600A has cut off strike pay to workers at Wolverine Worldwide's Rockford, Michigan tannery operations. Many of the 70 workers who remained on strike were

bitter about the sellout, saying that the union had pledged to back their struggle to the end.

In September, workers voted to accept terms offered by Wolverine in July, which should have settled the strike. However, management declared the offer was no longer available. On December 2, Wolverine, claiming to be acting at the behest of union workers who either remained on the job or crossed picket lines, removed a union security clause from the contract.

In February, the Michigan Labor Board will review union complaints and determine whether Wolverine must abide by its July contract offer and rehire striking workers.

## **Regional carrier undermining pilots' retirement fund**

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) filed a lawsuit December 31 against Mesaba Airlines charging the company with failure to deposit money into the pilots' 401(k) plan.

The underpayments go back to 1996 and amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to ALPA. The airline has refused to reveal exact details of the amounts missing from 401(k) plans and missed a November 30 deadline to resolve the matter.

Mesaba, which operates about 600 daily flights as a regional carrier for Northwest Airlines, faces a strike by its 844 pilots when a 30-day cooling-off period expires January 9. Negotiators have deadlocked over pilots' demands to improve their retirement accounts, which are 25 to 30 percent less than those of other regional airlines. Newly hired pilots receive annual starting pay of less than \$17,000, while half of the union's pilots earn less than \$32,000 a year.

## **Michigan bookstore strikers get tentative agreement**

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union reached a tentative agreement with the Borders Group bookstore chain after a seven-week strike at its Ann Arbor, Michigan downtown outlet, securing a first-ever

contract.

No details concerning the deal have been made available. Strikers are expected to discuss terms of the agreement this week and hold a ratification vote on January 7 or 8. Workers had been demanding starting wages of \$7.95 per hour with a rise to \$9.95 after two years and \$10 per hour for supervisors, with annual increments of 4.5 percent.

### **Maine firefighters challenge contract vote**

Firefighters in Portland, Maine have begun circulating a petition demanding an emergency union meeting following a disputed contract ratification vote.

More than 200 firefighters, paramedics and dispatchers voted over several days. The first three tallies of the ballots showed the contract was defeated. A fourth tally, sanctioned by the union leadership, resulted in a 93-92 vote for passage. Firefighters will use the meeting to demand an explanation of voting procedures and the process by which ballots are counted.

### **Strike by Wadena school support workers ends**

A four-month strike by 80 school support workers in Saskatchewan's Wadena School Division has come to an end after workers unanimously ratified a tentative agreement reached the last week of December. The school board had been forced to negotiate by a Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board (LRB) ruling saying it had not been negotiating in good faith. The LRB also ordered the school board to compensate the striking workers for wages lost during the period in which it was refusing to bargain.

The workers, represented by Local 3087 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been on strike since August 25 demanding more full-time positions, wage increases, wages for holidays and in-services and additional benefits. They have been without a contract for three years—since December 31, 2000. No details of the proposed three-year settlement have been released pending its ratification by the school division board.

### **Contract workers at Canada Post join union**

Sixty-four hundred contract workers for Canada Post will now be represented by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). The contract is separate from that of regular workers. The eight-year deal gives contract workers two weeks paid vacation, unpaid sick leave, and Employment Insurance (EI) and Workers

Compensation Board (WCB) coverage. Regular employees, in a three-year agreement, will receive a 3 percent wage increase, but will lose their severance provisions.

The contract workers, who are employed as mail carriers in rural and suburban areas, had hitherto received only about a third of the pay of unionized, regular mail carriers and were entirely without basic benefits and defenses. The federal government's 1981 Canada Post Corporation Act prohibited these workers being considered employees with collective bargaining rights under the Canada Labour Code.

### **Strike by Ottawa taxi dispatchers**

Forty-seven Ottawa taxi dispatchers are on strike for wage increases and benefits—they presently earn an average of \$9 per hour and have no benefits. The workers, members of Local 4266 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, are also demanding the return of a member of their bargaining committee who was dismissed during contract negotiations.

The strike began at midnight New Year's Eve after the workers rejected the company's offer of a paltry 23 cents per hour wage increase and no benefits. The day before, workers rejected company demands for significant concessions that included mandatory medical examinations, the elimination of overtime pay, and the exclusion of part-time workers from the bargaining unit.

The workers dispatch taxis for the Blue Line, Veterans, Capital and DJ Taxi services and are employed by Coventry Connections, which also owns the Blue Line and DJ's taxi services. Blue Line and Capital taxi drivers have been distributing a leaflet to their customers encouraging them to support the strike.



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