

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 January 2004

Uruguayan workers demand jobs

On January 16, Uruguayan workers—supporters of the Unemployed Workers Union—marched, rallied and barricaded highways. The workers are demanding the government carry out promises to create jobs. Uruguay is in the midst of a profound economic crisis. Seventeen percent of the population is unemployed—over 200,000 workers in a population of 3.3 million.

Mercedes Benz accused of complicity in Argentina's dirty war

A 215-year-old US law is being used to prosecute Mercedes Benz in a San Francisco court for complicity with the military dictatorship in the kidnapping of workers from its Gonzalez Catan plant near Buenos Aires in the late 1970s.

Seventeen workers were kidnapped from the plant, nine of whom disappeared and were murdered by the dictatorship. Eight others were released after being brutally tortured. The victims had all been members of the auto workers union at the plant.

Though Mercedes Benz denies any responsibility for the kidnappings, the Associated Press reports that one worker, Juan Jose Martin, described having been detained in the factory in 1976 by state security forces who were assisted by Mercedes Benz. He was held and tortured for 19 days. One day before being released his wife received a message from the plant saying that, given the circumstances, her husband could take an additional week off with pay. "How did they know I was going to be freed, when not even my family knew where I was?"

It is estimated that some 30,000 union and political activists disappeared, were tortured and killed in Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

Dominican transit workers threaten national strike

The National Transportation Workers Union (CNTU) announced January 14 it is planning a national strike on January 28-29 to protest the economic crisis in the Dominican Republic.

CNTU leaders accused the government of President Hipolito Mejia of ignoring the economic hardship that most people face and called on him not to run for reelection. They also called for the rejection of an agreement between the Mejia administration and the International Monetary Fund. In return for a US \$600 million loan, the government agreed to impose austerity measures, cutting education and other social services.

Unemployment on the rise in Latin America

A report released January 7 by the International Labor Organization (ILO) says that 19 million people are now unemployed in Latin America. The report also indicates that the quality of existing jobs has deteriorated. The ILO attributes the jobs crisis to the social effects of contractionary economic policies.

According to the statistics presented by the ILO, Brazilian

unemployment jumped from 12 to 12.4 percent in 2003. In Ecuador, the percentage of joblessness increased from 6 percent to 6.7 percent, in Mexico from 2.8 percent to 3.2 percent, in Uruguay from 16.5 percent to 17.4 percent, and in Venezuela it rose from 15.7 to 18.9 percent.

There were substantial job gains in only one country, Argentina, where unemployment fell by 5.9 percent. Unemployment in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama and Peru registered marginal improvements.

The ILO report indicated that youth employment has been particularly hard hit. Even in countries where the job outlook improved, such as Argentina and Chile, youth unemployment went up. Parallel with the increase in unemployment, wages have fallen. Currently about 40 percent of working families live below the poverty line. Minimum wages across the region lost 1.6 percent of their purchasing power in 2003. In Venezuela and Uruguay, the fall in purchasing power for the minimum wage was 15.9 percent and 15 percent respectively.

Six-year Colorado steel mill dispute settled

The United Steelworkers of America and Rocky Mountain Steel Mills reached a tentative agreement January 15, bringing to an end a six-year labor struggle at the company's Pueblo, Colorado facility. The agreement would permit all union members to return to work while allowing replacement workers to remain on the job.

The new contract, yet to be ratified, calls for a 10 percent wage increase over the five-year life of the agreement. The company has indicated that the proposals governing health insurance will protect them against rising costs. The agreement also establishes a labor dispute settlement trust that will compensate workers employed by Rocky Mountain Steel Mills between October 3, 1997, and December 31, 1997. The total cost of the trust is estimated by the company at US\$32 million.

Of particular interest to the union bureaucracy is its right to appoint a director to the company's board of directors. The agreement also allows for a broad neutrality clause in relation to unionization of other company facilities in the future.

Another tentative agreement for Wisconsin Tyson strikers

Striking meatpackers at Tyson Foods' Jefferson, Wisconsin, plant will vote again on an amended tentative agreement covering the 470 members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 538. Workers rejected the previous company offer January 11.

Workers struck the world's largest beef, chicken and pork processor on February 28, 2003, after the company asked for major concessions. They included a four-year wage freeze; a lower-tier wage scale for new hires; elimination of the profit-sharing plan; cuts in vacation, sick leave and pensions; and higher

premium costs for a reduced health care plan.

The union has refused to discuss details of recent negotiations. Local 538 President Ron Peich would only say that the company made a single change to its previous offer. The AFL-CIO, while giving lip service to the Tyson strikers, has isolated the strike. Under National Labor Relations rules, replacement workers would be eligible to decertify the UFCW as bargaining representative at the Jefferson plant once the one-year anniversary of the strike passes.

Union files charges against firing of Pittsburgh janitors

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) filed unfair labor practice charges against Independence Management Company, which operates a downtown Pittsburgh office building, for illegally firing nine union janitors.

In October of last year the SEIU concluded a contract with Pittsburgh building operators, including Independence Management, which provided improved health insurance benefits for the downtown's 750 janitors. Following the Christmas holiday, Independence fired the janitors after it turned over the cleaning contract for the downtown Center City building to a nonunion contractor.

Indiana gas strike settled

The strike by 359 gas workers in central Indiana ended January 16 when workers ratified a new agreement with Vectren Corporation. According to a company spokesman, the new accord provides for a 3 percent annual wage increase over the course of the five-year contract and requires workers to pay 12 to 16 percent of health care premiums.

The terms appear to be similar to the contract originally rejected by workers December 3. The exception, says the company, involves the reallocation of money to pensions that were originally slated for an incentive program.

Neither the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, nor the United Steelworkers, which represent the various workers who repair and lay pipe and install gas meters, have commented on the agreement or the ratification vote tally.

Internal audit apprised Wal-Mart management of workplace violations

Revelations of a three-year-old internal audit of 128 Wal-Mart stores threaten to further expose the company's policy of ruthless exploitation, this time involving violations of child labor laws and state regulations.

The audit, which is now under court seal, is a compilation of a week's worth of time-clock records for about 25,000 workers. It reveals 1,371 cases where minors worked too late at night or worked during school hours or worked beyond the maximum number of hours permitted in a day. Another 60,767 possible instances were logged during which workers did not take breaks, and there were 15,705 occasions where employees worked through meal breaks.

A Wal-Mart spokesman told the *New York Times* that the audit was meaningless and suggested the infractions were the product of workers forgetting to punch their timecards properly. This charge is belied by the fact that there are presently more than 40 lawsuits in the courts alleging Wal-Mart managers forced workers to work through lunch and rest breaks without compensation.

Workers are also angered over the company's long-time policy of locking employees working the overnight shift inside some of its Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores. The practice is allegedly used to keep robbers out, but some managers admit it is aimed at preventing employee theft. The *Times* noted that workers could not get out of the stores, even when a worker in Indiana suffered a heart attack, when hurricanes hit in Florida and when workers' wives have gone into labor. In another case, one worker at a Corpus Christi, Texas, Sam's Club had his ankle crushed by heavy machinery but could not get out until a manager with a key arrived more than an hour later. Workers were told if they used the emergency exits they would be fired.

Hamilton community workers on strike

More than 35 employees of the Community Adolescent Network of Hamilton have been on strike since January 5 over the issues of wages, benefits and labor/management relations. The workers, who are employed at two group homes in the Hamilton area, make an average of \$14 an hour, with some part-time workers making less than \$11. There are no benefits or provisions for part-time workers, even though most of the 55 workers with the Network are part-time.

The strikers, represented by Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 262, are asking for pay increases of 5 percent. They were offered increases of only 1.5 percent per year plus another 1 percent in annual pay equity adjustment.

Nova Scotia blood-service strikers reject contract offer

On January 12, workers from Nova Scotia Union of Public and Private Employees in Halifax, entering their 10th week on strike, voted down a contract offer. The 45 clinic assistants, drivers and recruitment coordinators have been picketing since November 8, demanding wage parity with blood service organizations in other parts of the country.

Initially the union was seeking a \$2 an hour raise, but recently reduced this demand to 80 cents. However, the employer has offered only 40 cents an hour. The rejected deal represented only small improvements over a package offered before the strike.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact