

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 February 2004

Antiwar protest in Honduras

Thousands marched in downtown Tegucigalpa and other Honduran cities February 5 to protest the US war in Iraq. The Popular Bloc (BP), a coalition of civic and student groups, led the demonstration. The protest was in response to President Ricardo Maduro's decision to send 370 troops to Iraq. Joining the BP in the four-kilometer-long march were contingents of teachers and health care workers.

Colombian government represses oil workers union

Ecopetrol, the Colombian state-owned oil company, is attempting to decertify the union that represents oil workers, the Workers Sindicalist Union (USO). Union leaders say they have contingency plans for an immediate strike if the Ministry of Social Protection acts favorably on Ecopetrol's petition.

USO has been the target of government repression and paramilitary violence by death squads linked to the Colombian military. The government accuses USO leaders of supporting the ongoing guerrilla insurgency and alleges that USO Vice President Hernando Hernandez passed on information to the National Liberation Army (ELN) to assist in blowing up important infrastructure facilities.

More than 100 USO militants and lawyers have been assassinated over the last 14 years by state agents and paramilitary death squads, including Hernandez' father and two of his brothers.

Brazilian officials free a senator's slaves

On February 13, a Labor Ministry team freed 32 slaves who had been forced to work on a farm owned by a senator from Tocantins state, Joao Ribeiro. The freed slaves were held in "debt bondage," with the landlord forcing them to work for no wages and with no days off to repay the purchase of tools.

Labor Ministry officials declared they had not known who owned the farm when they freed the workers.

Ribeiro is the fourth congressperson to be accused of

operating farms with slave labor. The team's coordinator, Luiz Antonio Camargo, said the involvement of government officials in slavery has become a national "shame."

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are between 25,000 and 40,000 slaves in Brazil. Recently the Brazilian House of Deputies approved a law that allows the government to confiscate the land of producers that own slaves. Agricultural landowners had blocked passage of this legislation for years. Brazilian President Inacio Lula da Silva, meanwhile, has asked "good farm owners" to turn in the slave owners.

Workers strike worldwide pipeline company

Workers at two Ameron International Corporation facilities in Southern California and another in Hawaii entered their second week on strike. The company is demanding an increase in workers' share of health care contributions from 20 percent to 30 percent. Issues of pensions and wages have also separated the two sides. About 250 strikers are divided between the company's California concrete and pipe division in Rancho Cucamonga and a steel fabrication plant in Fontana.

Workers at the two facilities are represented by Laborers International Local 783 and Boilermakers Local 92. Another 160 workers represented by the Teamsters struck the company's quarry and ready-mix concrete operations in Oahu, Hawaii.

Ameron has five other plants in California and Arizona that are not on strike. In addition, the company has operations throughout North America, South America, Europe, Australasia and Asia, and has several joint venture companies in the US, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt.

More concession demands in Washington state dairy lockout

Contract talks between Teamsters Local 66 and WestFarms management broke off last week after management escalated its demands on the 194 workers

at its Darigold plants in Seattle and Issaquah, Washington. WestFarms locked out workers five months ago and has been spending \$30,000 a day on security and replacement workers.

The company now reports it is losing money and has withdrawn an earlier proposal that included a first-year raise totaling \$500 and a pension increase of 10 cents an hour. Instead, the company is demanding a freeze on wages and pensions, a two-tier wage scale, and the substitution of an inferior company benefit plan to replace the Teamsters plan.

WestFarms made a \$2.3 million profit last year from its 11 plants in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California. Northwest Dairy Association, a cooperative comprised of 700 dairy farms, owns and operates WestFarms and its Darigold subsidiaries.

Staff workers strike Connecticut health care agency

More than 100 staff workers for United Services Inc. picketed outside the agency's Dayville, Connecticut, office to protest the failure of the company to negotiate a fair contract. Management has proposed a meager 1.5 percent wage increase that will be swallowed up by hikes in insurance premiums, along with the demand for mandatory forced overtime and elimination of compensation time.

Some workers have indicated they would be willing to accept the 1.5 percent wage increase providing United Services did not alter the health insurance plan. "I'm shocked that they've taken such a hard line," Mary Silvestri, a medical records secretary, told the *Norwich Bulletin*. "We're willing to compromise and they refuse." United Services workers last had a raise in July 2002.

Medical technicians call one-day protest strike at Minnesota hospital

Thirty medical technicians held a one-day protest outside United Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, to protest a lack of progress in contract negotiations between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 113 and the Minnesota Epilepsy Group that provides for patient care at the hospital.

Management's demand for increases in health care costs negates minimal pay offers, resulting in a net loss for workers, says the union. The SEIU has filed a number of unfair labor practice charges against the company and says it will call more and longer walkouts

unless bargaining improves. The strikers include monitor techs and EEG techs. They are among the lowest-paid hospital monitoring technicians in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

Saskatchewan teachers launch protest campaign

Teachers in the provincial capital of Regina, members of the Saskatchewan Government Employees Union (SGEU), held the first of a series of informational pickets outside the office of the province's department of education on February 13. The main aim of the picket was to get their employer, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology, back to the bargaining table.

The teachers are involved in contract negotiations covering 1,100 public servants across Saskatchewan whose previous agreement expired in June of last year. The last round of talks broke down in January after management refused to discuss financial issues, saying they did not have a mandate from the New Democratic Party provincial government. The NDP has indicated there will be a new round of layoffs in the public service to be spelled out in the upcoming provincial budget. Other issues include wages, pay equity and work hours.

Workers strike against national union body

About 110 workers went on strike February 13 at the Ottawa offices of the largest trade union federation in the country—the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Of the striking workers, 60 are members of Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) and the rest are clerical workers represented by the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU).

The main issues in the dispute include pensions, job security and contract concessions that the CLC is seeking from CEP. The CEP members have been without a contract for almost eight months; OPEIU members for more than a year. Both unions are demanding an agreement that does not include concessions.



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