Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 February 2004

48-hour national strike in the Dominican Republic: eight dead

A two-day general strike hit the Dominican Republic January 28-29 in response to President Hipolito Mejia's economic policies, which have led to the collapse of living standards and a massive emigration during January.

The strike ended with eight deaths and an undetermined number of injuries, victims of military and police violence. One strike organizer, José Vasquez Castro, was shot dead by police at close range in the head. Union leaders denounced the excessive force used by the soldiers, many of them just returned from duty in Iraq.

The strike had been organized by a coalition of unions and left-wing groups demanding measures to stem the rise in the cost of living and the collapse of the Dominican currency, such as a moratorium on the nation's external debt and the elimination of taxes on gasoline and other fuels.

In addition to those killed and injured, 400 were arrested, including several union leaders detained before the strike "for their own protection," according to Interior Secretary Pedro Franco Badia.

President Mejia refused to meet with the strike leaders and rejected the strikers' demands. The unemployment rate in the Dominican Republic is now 16 percent. The price of many consumer goods and fuels has doubled in the last year.

As a consequence of the country's economic collapse, thousands of Dominicans have taken to sea in precarious boats trying to reach the island of Puerto Rico, a US possession. So far this year, the US Coast Guard has intercepted 1,000 immigrants, compared to 190 at the same time last year.

Nickel miners to strike this week in Colombia

On January 24, Nickel miners in the Department of Cordoba in northern Colombia voted to launch a strike of indefinite duration. The strike vote followed the collapse of negotiations with owners of the Cerromatoso mine and smelter. At issue are wages, severance pay, education subsidies and grievance procedures. Barring a last-minute settlement, the strike will begin February 4.

Cerromatoso, owned by the Anglo-Australian transnational BHP Billinton, is one of the region's main employers, with 950 workers. The dispute in Colombia coincides with a possible strike by 1,000 Canadian nickel miners, members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), against Falconbridge, Inc. in Sudbury, Ontario.

Mexican teachers denounce corrupt bureaucracy

Hundreds of Mexican educators, members of the National Coalition of Education Workers (CNTE), participated in a 12-hour protest caravan on January 29 to protest anti-democratic reforms in the official National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) that would entrench control of the organization by a corrupt group headed by congresswoman Esther Gordillo.

The date of the SNTE congress has not yet been announced. The SNTE bureaucracy typically delays announcing the date and place of congresses to prevent the opposition from showing up. This practice is known in Mexico as "fast-track congresses."

Throughout the caravan, the teachers rallied in various parts of Mexico City, including the headquarters of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Gordillo is one of the PRI's leaders. They also rallied in front of the building where Gordillo maintains her luxurious penthouse apartment.

The CNTE teachers have declared that their aim is to be present at the convention of the next fast-track congress to block the reelection of the Gordillista leadership, headed by Rafael Ochoa. The CNTE is demanding a vote of all the SNTE's 1.4 million members.

The educators carried signs that said "Gordillo, murderer, wolf and sellout," denouncing the relationship between Gordillo and the PRI. CNTE leaders warned that Gordilla has formed armed squads within the union to repress the dissidents.

Volkswagen workers' union approves "4 for 3" plan in Mexico

On January 28, Mexican autoworkers, under pressure from the union bureaucracy, approved the extension of the "4 for 3" plan until September of this year. The "4 for 3" consists of a four-day workweek followed by three days off at the VW plant in Mexico that assembles the Beetle model.

The union signaled its prostration before management by organizing department assemblies at which officials warned autoworkers that if they voted the plan down, management would sack 3,000 workers.

Rank-and-file autoworkers denounced the union practice of holding small meetings to avoid a plant-wide meeting. At the small assemblies, dissident workers were prevented from speaking against the plan.

Chilean copper workers strike

On January 30, workers at the Cerro Colorado copper mine, owned by the Anglo-Australian transnational BHP Billiton, walked off the job after the union and the company failed to agree on a new contract.

Two days earlier, the miners had rejected the company's latest offer and voted to strike. Cerro Colorado employs 411 miners. BHP-Billiton has offered a 3.7 percent wage increase, below the union's latest demand of 5 percent. In addition, the company failed to address the union's demands for improvements in education subsidies, medical care and other benefits.

Union calls off Pennsylvania gas strike

On January 29, union officials called off the 10-day strike against Dominion Peoples, the gas company for western Pennsylvania. The capitulation came despite claims earlier in the day by United Gas Workers Union Local 69 president Robert Mitchell that the union would remain on strike because the company's most recent proposal remained unchanged from the offer workers rejected when they walked out January 19.

In ordering the return to work, Mitchell advanced a new contract proposal that he claimed "is actually a cheaper package than what the company has on the table right now."

Dominion Peoples originally demanded caps on pensions, cuts in company contributions to the 401(k) program, and a reduction in the amount of life insurance workers can obtain upon retirement.

Domino sugar plant closes in Brooklyn, New York

The American Sugar Refining Company shut down almost all of its operations January 30, eliminating the jobs of 220 workers, some of whom who have worked in the plant for about 30 years. There remains only a skeleton crew of about 20 workers who will be packaging sugar cubes and plastic toy figurines with cinnamon sugar until the plant shuts down completely later in the year.

The company, which bought the plant in 2001, announced that it had to end production due to a fall in the demand for their sugar as a result of competition from other sweeteners, such as high-fructose corn syrup.

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Workers say the company is trying to cheat them out of severance pay it owes.

The closing of the refining and packing plant is part of an overall decline in manufacturing jobs in Brooklyn. In 1958, there were more than 222,000 manufacturing jobs in that borough, compared to less than 40,000 in 2003.

Approximately 300 workers, members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1814, were engaged in a bitter strike that closed the plant for 20 months from mid-June 1999 to February 2001. Management provoked the strike by demanding that over 100 jobs be cut without regard to seniority, eliminating the guaranteed 40-hour week, contracting out work for maintenance and repair, eliminating some personal and sick days off, and reducing the company's contribution to the health and welfare funds. The parent company at that time was Tate & Lyle of London, one of the world's giants in the production of sweeteners. It claimed that it needed to streamline its production process due to falling profits in the industry.

The union leadership never lifted a finger to mobilize other workers to support the strike. Although the ILA is a national union with 47,000 members and has $51 million in assets, it did nothing to shut down the plant such as stopping shipments coming in from Baltimore. Indeed, with both union and media silence, hardly anyone who lived in Brooklyn even knew that there was a strike at Domino Sugar. As a result, the strikers one by one returned to work on company terms. By February 2001, those workers who remained on strike acceded to the company's demands.

Leading ergonomics experts boycott Fed symposium, charge Bush with blocking progress

Eleven of the United States' leading experts on ergonomic research boycotted the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA's) recent symposium on workplace-related injuries. They charged that the meeting was being used by industry and the Bush administration to block long-overdue workplace reforms and deny proven research.

David Rempel, a San Francisco bioengineer and one of the boycotters, told the *Baltimore Sun*, "By and large, everyone on the committee was selected because of their opposition to the ergonomic standard." Another boycotter, University of Michigan industrial engineer Don Chaffin, said, "If enough people get up and say, 'We need to know more, we need to know more,' we'll end up with another comprehensive review. It's called paralysis by analysis."

Researchers believe enough is already known about musculoskeletal disorders to implement workplace changes. But corporations oppose the measures on the grounds they will cut into profits. A 2001 report by the National Academies of Science revealed that every year 1 million Americans suffer significant work-related injuries that cost the economy about $50 billion a year, not to mention the devastation to workers' living standards and lifestyles.

Minnesota nurses strike senior living center

Twenty-four licensed practical nurses and other staff were scheduled to walk the picket lines February 2 at Arrowhead Senior Living Community center in Eveleth, Minnesota, after management and the United Steelworkers union failed to reach an agreement.

The two sides failed to resolve health insurance and contract-length issues, while workers opposed management's demand for a wage freeze. "We have given our final proposal," declared a Senior Living spokesperson. Management is bringing in replacement workers to run the 100-bed facility for the duration of the strike.

Supreme Court ruling clears the way for strikebreaking

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that Montreal's Place des Arts was not violating the Quebec Labour Code when it responded to a 1999 technicians' strike by requiring customers to hire their own technicians. The Supreme Court ruling disingenuously holds that the center's actions were not strikebreaking, but rather a business winding up one aspect of its own operations.

The ruling goes against a number of previous rulings on the dispute, including a January 2001 Quebec Superior Court injunction forbidding the Place des Arts from employing non-union technicians and a September 2001 ruling by the Labour Commissioner that the technicians had been illegally fired and were owed rehiring and compensation for lost work. The technicians, organized in Local 56 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), are set to begin a new round of negotiations with the centre.

Aurora shelter counselors locked out

On January 24, the management of Yellow Brick House shelter in Aurora, Ontario, locked out the counselors and shelter residents, forcing the residents to move to a facility with little security and no access to a kitchen. The 38 shelter employees, members of CUPE Local 3636, responded by setting up a picket line outside the shelter. The workers are resisting a workplace reorganization plan that management claims requires the layoff of nine experienced counselors. All those targeted for firing are prominent union activists or members of the current bargaining committee.

Workers reject Falconbridge offer

Workers at Falconbridge Nickel in Sudbury—where almost 5 percent of the world's nickel is smelted—rejected a wage and benefit offer made Thursday by their employer. The offer included rollbacks on the pension plan and the cost of living program. It also included provisions that would have allowed the company to contract work out to nonunion labor. A lockout is widely expected. The workers are represented by Local 598 of the Canadian Auto Workers.

Strike vote at Telus

Ten thousand workers at western telecommunications company Telus have rejected the wage and benefit offer put forward by the company and voted in favor of a strike. Job action is expected to begin February 3, although the leadership of the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) has indicated that it will probably be limited to refusing overtime.

Telus was recently granted an injunction by the Canada Industrial Relations Board compelling the TWU to withdraw television ads highlighting the impact of the company's drastic downsizing and cost-cutting measures on customer service. The workers have been without a contract since late 2000.

Woodbine racetrack employees accept new collective agreement

Employees at Woodbine racetrack in Toronto, Ontario, have ratified a new collective agreement, ending a lockout that began January 17. The job action started when 137 security workers were locked out. One week later, food and beverage workers joined them, expanding the number of striking employees to 800. On January 25, they voted down an offer that attempted to punish locked-out security officers and that did not meet their demands for the consolidation of bargaining units, wage increases, and improvements to benefits and job security provisions.

The new agreement unifies members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union Local 75 and Service Employees International Union Local 528. The settlement contains a 10 percent wage increase and benefit improvements including a new pension plan for security officers.

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