

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 February 2004

Hunger strike by unemployed workers in Argentina

On February 6, hundreds of members of two of Argentina's unemployed workers' associations began a hunger strike at the Labor Ministry in Buenos Aires. At issue is the government's decision to eliminate benefits for more than 96,000 workers. The day before, unemployed workers set up barricades in La Plata, capital of Buenos Aires province, demanding increases in unemployment benefits and food subsidies.

Unemployment benefits currently amount to US\$51 a month per unemployed worker, less than half of what the government estimates is the minimum necessary for a family to pay for basic necessities.

The demonstrators began arriving in the morning, and by noon there were more than 500 at the ministry, located in the Buenos Aires financial district. As more continued to arrive, their numbers added to the normal traffic congestion in the area.

According to Raul Castells, leader of the Independent Movement of the Retired and unemployed (MIJD), demonstrations will take place across Argentina on February 9.

Public health doctors on strike in Brazil

A strike by doctors at the National Social Security Institute (INSS) in Porto Alegre is now in its fourth month. The doctors are demanding a 40-hour workweek and transparency in hiring and promotion procedures.

INSS officials assert that doctors have been gradually returning to work, claiming that about 50 percent of the doctors are on the job, up from 30 percent when the strike began on December 3, 2003.

Retired migrant workers occupy Mexican president's ranch

Over 2,000 former migrant workers protested at the ranch of Mexican president Vicente Fox on February 7, demanding compensation for wages deducted when they worked in the United States as part of the "bracero" program. The Pro Bracero Alliance (BRACEROPROA) organized the demonstration. Workers arrived from throughout Mexico in 50 buses and in private vehicles to demand a meeting with Fox.

The workers forced themselves past 70 guards into the Fox ranch in Guanajato, Mexico, and occupied it for a few hours. The men and women had worked in the United States between 1942 and 1967 as part of an agreement between the Mexican and US governments. Under the plan, 10 percent of the workers' wages were deposited directly in the National Bank of Rural Credit (BANRURAL.) The money was never returned to the workers.

To diffuse the situation and negotiate with the retirees, the government sent Ramon Martin Huerta, an official of the Ministry of Governance, to the ranch. An agreement was made that negotiations will continue in Mexico City, and at that point the

workers left the ranch. No arrests were made, and officials declared that no charges would be filed against the workers, who were mostly elderly.

Though Martin Huerta declared that the solution to the problem is "very simple," the Fox administration claims that there is no money to return the stolen wages plus interest. BRACEROPROA estimates that 4 million workers are owed US\$500 billion.

Teachers strike in Colombia over back pay

Three thousand teachers in Santa Marta, a city in Colombia's Caribbean coast, went on strike on February 3 over back wages that in some cases are five years in arrears.

The Magdalena Educators Union declared that the teachers are owed 16.3 billion pesos, approximately US\$6 million. The union is asking for an immediate payment of US\$1.1 million, with the rest to be paid over time. Santa Marta's mayor declared that the city does not have the money and has asked the central government to bail out the city. He also stated that there will be no funds for school improvements and postponed plans to make public schools free of charge to all students.

Hawaiian cement workers strike

More than 110 Hawaiian cement workers struck Hawaiian Cement on February 7, one day after 140 workers at another cement company, Ameron Hawaii, walked off the job. Contracts for both groups of workers expired on December 31 and have been under negotiations between the Teamsters union and company officials since November.

Ameron Hawaii's management has been seeking to increase the portion of medical payments made by workers from 20 percent to 30 percent. Negotiators for the union and Hawaiian Cement are stuck on issues of sick leave and medical benefits. The strike has put some 40 building construction projects on hold while public works maintenance and road repairs are being delayed.

New York City school bus drivers plan suit against union

Rank-and-file school bus drivers plan to sue their union for not opposing a private bus company's violation of their seniority rights. About 35 out of the 800 union drivers who work for Jo-Lo Bus Company obtained a lawyer after officials of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 ignored their protests over the company's splitting of its routes with a newly created company called Grandpa's Bus Company. Jo-Lo compelled some high-seniority drivers to forfeit their old routes and accept inferior ones under threat of being fired.

"They're just playing a shell game," the worker's lawyer, Paul Shoemaker, told the New York *Daily News*. "Whether the runs are in Jo-Lo or the new company, the senior people should have the right to pick through all the runs available."

Union leaders protested that since the Education Department

approved Jo-Lo's proposal to transfer routes, they had no choice but to go along. Jo-Lo has also transferred routes to two other bus companies that are under its ownership—Bobby's Bus Company and Lorissa Bus Service, Inc.

Filipino domestic worker files suit for unpaid wages

A migrant Filipino worker has filed a legal complaint in US District Court in New Jersey charging two residents of a New Jersey suburb owe her US\$38,000 in unpaid wages. The worker, known under the pseudonym Evelyn Aguilar, was paid US\$1.60 an hour for providing care for two small children, laundering, cleaning, ironing, grocery shopping, preparing meals and washing the car for Pui Yin Ma and Sau Chum Ho.

Aguilar says she was poorly treated by her employers and forced to sleep on a thin mat on the floor in the infant's room. "My employers treated me like I was ignorant and I don't think they expected me to fight," said Aguilar. "I wanted to show them that all people are equal and that I can take a stand." Aguilar is being supported by the DAMAYAN Migrant Workers Association in her legal case.

Monitoring of New York City plumbers' union in wake of bribery scandal

The giant security firm Kroll Inc. has begun monitoring the New York plumbers union in the wake of an agreement between Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and the union's new officials. Last June, three of the local's officers were arrested and charged with receiving US\$60,000 in bribes from a contractor at Staten Island University. In return, the building company avoided paying more than US\$1 million in payments to the union's benefit funds.

Arrested in the scandal were three business agents: Domenick Goffredo, who received an annual salary of US\$108,000; Thomas Parrella, annual salary US\$103,000; and David Aginsky. All three face similar charges of grand larceny and bribery.

Pentagon memo foreshadows new attacks on Defense Department workers

The Pentagon sent a memo to federal unions on February 6 outlining labor-management proposals governing department workers, rules that American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) president John Gage termed, in an appeal to Congress, as "the first step to the wholesale destruction of the civil service system."

The memo advocates giving the Pentagon the right to slash jobs without observing veterans' preference and the elimination of all past labor-relations rules. Another part of the memo calls for barring federal workers from attending to union business during work hours. Any disputes would be adjudicated by a new Defense Labor Relations Board, comprising five or seven management officials and an unspecified number of union officials. The board would replace the old Merit Systems Protection Board, which would remain only as a last appeal following a decision by the Defense Labor Board.

Certain Defense Department jobs—such as human resource workers, intelligence officials and attorneys—would be barred from union representation. Remaining workers would have a right to union representation on a "fee-for-service" basis, meaning that workers would only contact and pay a union once a dispute emerges.

Aluminum workers occupy Quebec plant

On January 27, more than 2,000 workers affiliated with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Quebec Labor Federation (QFL) occupied the Alcan aluminum plant in Arvida, a small town in the province of Quebec. The following Saturday, over 5,000 people came out to demonstrate in support of the occupation.

The occupation followed the announcement two weeks ago by Quebec Liberal prime minister Jean Charest that four Alcan smelters would be closed by April of this year with the loss of at least 550 jobs. Alcan has since obtained a court order from the Quebec Labor Relations Board to force workers to comply with its plans, meaning that they could face heavy fines for each day the occupation continues. The workers have continued to run the plant at maximum capacity. Alcan is the world's largest producer of aluminum after buying French aluminum giant Pechiney last month for C\$6.3 billion.

Miners locked out at Sudbury nickel operation

Mining company Falconbridge Ltd. locked out 1,100 workers February 2 at its nickel-mining operations in Sudbury in central Ontario. The workers are members of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union Local 598 (CAW). The main issue in the dispute is the company's demand to replace retiring workers with outside contractors and outsource mining work at any new projects.

The previous dispute in 2001 lasted seven months, and since then the corporation has become more aggressive in hiring outside workers in order to cut costs and weaken the union.

Strike at Hershey Canada

About 600 employees at the Hershey Canada plant in Smiths Falls, Ontario, went on strike on February 5. The workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), are demanding an improved pension plan that would allow them to retire early while keeping health benefits.

According to Harry Ghadban, director of Local 462, under the current plan workers can retire before age 65 only by taking a 6 percent pension penalty for each year before the normal retirement date. The company offered to allow penalty-free retirement at age 62 for workers with 25 years experience, but the union wants to go below that age by rearranging funds the company has put on the bargaining table. The employees voted 92 percent in favor of a strike after the last contract expired on January 31.



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