Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 February 2004

Mexican teachers and electricians march against privatizations

More than 10,000 teachers and electrical workers demonstrated in Mexico's central Zocalo Square against the Fox administration's plan to privatize key industries. The teachers were members of the dissident National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE). CNTE leaders say that Elba Esther Gordillo, a senator and leader of the National Sindicate of Education Workers (SNTE, of which CNTE is a part) is one of the principal promoters of the plan.

At a rally in Constitution Plaza at the end of the demonstration, CNTE members demanded democratic control over the SNTE. They denounced the SNTE bureaucracy, saying it wants to undermine teachers' past conquests.

Argentine unemployed block major highways

On February 19, Argentine unemployed workers blocked 107 highways for over five hours. The protest culminated in a rally in front of the National Congress Building in Buenos Aires. Raúl Castells, leader of the Independent Movement of Pensioners and Unemployed workers (MIJD), spoke at the rally, calling the action a "great blow to this government's policies."

It was the largest protest of this type since workers began blocking highways in 1997, causing hours of traffic jams and delays across the country. It was conducted by organizations that have been described as "hard-line" in the country's press. Another sector of the unemployed has abandoned the road blockade tactic.

The blockade was called to demand the repeal of a 2000 labor reform law, which gained passage in part due to bribes paid to legislators. Also at issue is the restitution of subsidies for 25,000 unemployed workers that the government suspended, claiming that they had been processed incorrectly.

Police forces were present at the barricades with orders not to intervene. The government of Nestor Kirchner accused the unemployed groups of seeking to provoke a confrontation.

Educators strike São Paulo technical schools

Instructors and employees of the technical schools and colleges of São Paulo State began a strike of indefinite duration February 16. The workers are demanding a 72 percent wage increase to compensate for past years in which they received no raises.

Joao Ailton Lemos Ferreira, vice president of the Union of Public Technical Education Workers (SINTEPS), said that 70 percent of the system's 5,000 workers are supporting the strike, primarily in the biggest institutions.

"Each year the Council of São Paulo State University Deans (CRUESP) approves an increase," said Ferreira, "but the government never acts on it."

Uruguayan football players threaten strike

At an assembly held on February 17, the Union of Uruguayan Professional Football (SFPU) players voted to strike on February 27 (opening date of the national championships). The players are demanding a raise. According to the SFPU, the average monthly wage for a first division player is R$555 (about $190), with the majority of players receiving less than R$115. The workers are demanding a minimum salary of R$1,085, or about $380, for first division players.

Mexican *maquiladora* lays off 2,000 workers with no pay

Lucky Star Inc., a textile *maquiladora* in Aguascalientes, Mexico, shut down operations on February 20, leaving 2,000 workers without jobs and still owed their last month's wages. The company said it had decided to relocate to Puerto Rico. Government authorities declared that they were totally surprised by the move.

On February 21, several hundred sacked workers protested to the Labor Court in Aguascalientes, demanding that it act on their case.

Medical strike in Santo Domingo

Nurses, doctors and laboratory technicians at the public health hospitals run by the Social Security Institute of the Dominican Republic struck February 16. The employees are demanding a 100 percent increase in wages and adequate funds to keep hospitals stocked with needed supplies and equipment.

This was the third strike by Social Security Institute employees this year. The health workers said they will press their demands with a two-day strike on February 24-25, and with a national march on Congress on February 26. Government authorities indicated that there was no money to meet the workers' demands.

Four workers die in Ohio bridge construction accident

Four Ohio ironworkers died last week and another four were injured when a 2-million-pound truss crane collapsed during work on the $220 million interstate bridge project over the Maumee River near Toledo.

Robert Lipinski, Mike Moreau, Mike Phillips and Arden Clark died when the crane fell off a concrete pier. All four men were experienced members of Iron Workers Local 55 and had

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followed their fathers into the trade. Engineers from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) began investigating the accident, accompanied by investigators from Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., which has been hired by Fru-Con, the Missouri-based general contractor in charge of the Maumee River project. The Iron Workers union said it has hired its own investigators to conduct an independent investigation.

The type of truss cranes used in the Maumee project are new to the area and more commonly used in Europe. The $3 million crane was designed and built by an Italian firm, Paolo de Nicola. Clifford Freyermuth, of the American Segmental Bridge Institute, told the *Toledo Blade*, "In terms of construction speed, there isn't any way to compete with it," referring to the construction technique.

New talks in Northern Michigan Hospital strike

Negotiators for Northern Michigan Hospital and the union representing more than 200 striking nurses will return to the bargaining table February 23 as the longest nurse strike in US history extends past the 15-month mark.

When the two sides last met on January 19, the hospital declared a new impasse in the strike. Teamsters Local 406 said it had only begun to discuss management's revised offer. It rejected the claim of an impasse, saying it had only begun to clarify contract language and still had many questions for the company.

Nurses first struck Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey on November 14, 2002, over wage and benefit issues along with the demand for lower patient-to-nurse ratios.

Oregon jury rules Wal-Mart must compensate 83 workers for unpaid overtime

A federal jury in Portland, Oregon, issued a verdict against Wal-Mart Stores Inc., saying the retailer must compensate 83 workers who worked unpaid overtime. Another 25 employees were denied compensation.

More than a year ago, a separate Portland federal jury became the first in the United States to determine that Wal-Mart had compelled its employees to work off the clock at 18 of the company's Oregon stores during the period between 1994 and 1999. Lawyers for the plaintiffs demonstrated that Wal-Mart engaged in a policy of locking employees in the store at the end of the night's shift and ordered them to work while not punched in. Company lawyers attempted to pass off the policy as a way of encouraging teamwork.

Compensation for the workers will be determined at a later date on an individual basis with payments expected to range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand. More than 30 similar suits against the company are pending in other states, while the company has settled a number of cases before they went to court.

Worker crushed in New York foundry

A maintenance worker at the Elmira, New York, foundry Kennedy Valve was caught and crushed in a conveyor belt on February 19. The worker, Timothy Blow, became the 10th employee killed since 1995 at a plant owned by parent company McWane Inc. of Alabama.

McWane's record came under the national spotlight as a result of a documentary by Public Broadcasting's "Frontline" as well as a reports in the *New York Times*. Two other workers at McWane plants were caught and killed in conveyor incidents. The Elmira plant had a previous death resulting from an explosion that ultimately led to the company paying a $500,000 fine. Last December, five senior managers at a McWane plant in New Jersey were indicted on charges of conspiring to violate safety and environmental laws.

CN workers reject contract brokered by union

About 5,000 maintenance, clerical and customer service workers employed at Canadian National Railway (CN) went on strike February 20 across Canada, rejecting the tentative agreement between CN and Canadian Auto Workers.

Union negotiators had focused their talks on pay and pensions, and they urged workers to accept three contract agreements brokered in late January that provided for wage hikes of 3 percent over three years. In votes last week, the workers rejected these proposals, signalling their dissatisfaction with workplace conditions: the company has adopted a hard-line approach to discipline that brought a sharp increase in disciplinary proceedings and suspensions and firings over minor issues. No new talks have been scheduled in the dispute.

A-Channel employees ratify new collective agreement

On February 14, striking employees of Edmonton, Alberta, TV station A-Channel, members of Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) of Canada, Local 1900, ratified a first collective agreement that includes an immediate 5 percent pay increase followed by increases of 3.5 percent in each of the next two years. More than 60 workers will return to work March 1, while about 10 workers have agreed to take a severance package.

The strike began September 17 of last year, when the A-Channel workers walked out in support of union proposals for a fair wage system and job security provisions.

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