

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 March 2004

Protest by government workers in Colombia

On February 26, tens of thousands of government workers carried out a national day of protest in Colombia to oppose the policies of the Alvaro Uribe administration.

Throughout the day workers walked out of their offices to attend rallies denouncing the socioeconomic crisis affecting Colombia and government plans to privatize government entities. The privatizations are expected to result in the elimination of entire departments and lead to mass layoffs.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Julio Roberto Gómez, president of the General Democratic Workers Confederation (CGTD) that represents the state employees, declared: "Thirteen million people exist in absolute poverty, 4 million are unemployed. Those devastating numbers forced the unions to carry out this protest."

Uribe plans to reduce the size of government by 800,000 workers. According to Gomez, 40,000 have already been sacked.

Puerto Rican phone workers threaten strike

On February 29, the Independent Brotherhood of Telephone workers (HIETEL) organized a strike vote among the 1,500 workers at Puerto Rico Telephone (PRT.) At issue is PRT's unilateral imposition of a contract. "This is our final offer; there will be no further negotiations," said PRT vice-president Ben Fernandez.

Contract talks had stalled after seven months over the issue of wages and health benefits. The pact increases the out-of-pocket medical expenses workers would be forced to pay. At the same time, it imposes a meager hourly wage increase of 60 cents per year over a three-year contract. HIETEL is asking for a total of US\$3 over the three years.

Peruvian truckers on strike

Peruvian truckers, who own and operate their own trucks, went on strike February 24 demanding the

government set a minimum freight rate. The government of President Alejandro Toledo insists rates be set by supply and demand, saying there are too many truckers. Transport Minister Jose Ortiz claims there are 100,000 trucks in Peru when only 60,000 are needed.

Owner-operators of passenger buses initially had joined the truckers' strike. However, they settled after the government promised to lower fuel prices and transit taxes.

University of Pennsylvania graduate students call two-day strike

An estimated 400 graduate students walked out of classes and labs February 26 and 27 to demand the University drop its NLRB appeal and allow the students' union campaign to go forward. The graduate students, who call their organization "Get-Up," positioned themselves at the university's major entrances to picket and hand out leaflets headlined "Welcome to Penn-Mart."

Back in November of 2002, an NLRB regional director determined that 1,000 of the University's 3,600 doctoral students were eligible to unionize. Last year an election was held at which reporters for the school's newspaper conducted an exit poll that found a majority of grad students voted to unionize. The university responded by filing an appeal of the case to the full NLRB, thereby blocking a count of the vote.

Government agencies refused to inform postal workers about possible ricin exposure

In testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, the president of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) criticized Homeland Security and other governmental agencies for their decision to not inform postal workers about possible exposure to the deadly poison ricin.

The ricin was contained in a letter postmarked October 17, 2003, and addressed to the White House. It was intercepted by the Secret Service at an offsite mail-processing center in Washington DC, but only released

by the FBI last week. In a meeting attended by representatives from Homeland Security, the FBI, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Postal Service and other agencies it was determined that the ricin was of a low grade and no announcement would be made.

William Burrus, president of the APWU, told the Senate Committee that postal workers “will not be treated like a canary in the mining industry,” and asked why workers who may have been exposed to the poison were not notified.

Ohio Pepsi workers strike over open-ended health care costs

Workers at G&J Pepsi Bottling Company in Franklin Furnace, Ohio, entered their third week on strike over health care costs and other issues. The 170 members of Teamsters Local 92 rejected G&J’s demand for what has been termed an open-ended health care package where there would be no limit on the out-of-pocket costs the company could impose.

The strike involves drivers, production workers and plant maintenance workers.

Ford workers support CN Rail strike

Fourteen hundred workers at the St. Thomas and Essex plants of Ford Motor Co., and 2,500 workers at Ford’s two Oakville plants, refused last week to unload trains filled with car parts, in support of the strike by workers at CN Rail.

The action resulted in the closing of the Ford plants for two days. Five thousand CN Rail workers, including clerical, shopcraft and intermodal workers, have been on strike since February 20 after rejecting the tentative agreement between CN and their union, the Canadian Auto Workers.

The Teamsters Canada Rail conference, representing locomotive engineers, has reported that the use of strikebreakers has led to a number of safety incidents, including one in which an engineer at the Winnipeg terminal was seriously injured. The 130 Teamsters members at the Winnipeg terminal have threatened to strike unless their safety concerns are addressed.

Settlement in Falconbridge strike

The strike by more than 1,000 production and maintenance workers at Falconbridge’s Sudbury plant ended with the ratification of a new contract on February 22. The main issues in the strike, which began early in February, were the contracting out of new

development and the replacement of retired employees with nonunion workers. The workers are represented by Local 598 of the Canadian Auto Workers.

The new contract contains a guarantee that new projects will be staffed with unionized workers, a wage increase of 40 cents in the first year, a cost-of-living allowance in each of the three years and pension improvements.

General strike at Laval University

Five hundred part-time teachers at Laval University in Quebec City launched a general strike on February 23. The main issue in the dispute is the pay difference between full-time and part-time teachers, working conditions, and research funding. Part-time professors at the Université du Québec in Gatineau and in Rimouski staged a one-day walkout in support of the strikers.



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