

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 March 2004

Panamanian banana workers strike

Some 500 banana workers on the Pacific Coast of Panama struck February 28. The workers are demanding higher pay for hours worked overtime and the rehiring of a victimized worker.

The banana plantations in the region were once property of Chiquita Brands, a banana monopoly. Chiquita sold the property in 2003 to the banana union, claiming that its costs were too high.

The Múltiple Services Cooperative (COOSEMUPAR) produces half the bananas exported from Panama on 3,000 hectares (7413 acres) of land. Though formally owned by the workers, COOSEMUPAR's President Jose Morris rejected the workers' demands, arguing that banana workers wages are above the legal minimum for Panama.

Since COOSEMUPAR took control of the land, it has systematically cut wages and benefits that workers had gained from Chiquita, including free water and electricity for their homes.

Banana workers are among the most exploited in the world. Union workers in Panama and Costa Rica earn the most, about US\$8 per day. In Ecuador, where workers have been prohibited from forming unions, workers earn as little as US\$2 per day. Beginning in 1998, the three largest companies—Dole, Del Monte and Chiquita—responded to a crisis of over production both by divesting themselves of high-cost plantations and contracting out banana production. They use their market power to pay producers as little as US\$2 for a 40-pound box that is later sold to supermarkets for US\$25 dollars.

Communication workers continue struggle against Puerto Rico Telephone

Workers are threatening to strike a week after Puerto Rico Telephone (PRT) unilaterally imposed a contract on 1,500 of its employees, members of the Independent Brotherhood of Telephone Employees (HIETEL.)

On February 29, HIETEL members voted to strike if outstanding issues remained unresolved. On March 2 it appeared that negotiations had reached an impasse. A union picket line went up in front of PRT headquarters in San Juan, repudiating the imposed contract.

At issue is management's offer of a US\$0.60 increase in

hourly wages each year of a three-year contract that HIETEL considers inadequate; the increase is accompanied with higher deductibles for medical care and less time off for sickness.

Workers vote to strike against Puerto Rico Head Start centers

On March 3, employees at 67 Head Start centers run by the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico voted to strike. The vote followed a decision by the Archbishop of San Juan, Monsignor Roberto Gonzalez, to close down the program. Gonzalez claims the action is the result of workers' wage demands.

The closure of the Head Start centers will affect 1,793 children. The Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) that represents the workers set up a picket line in front of Gonzalez' house on March 3 to protest his "illegal and anti labor practices."

Honduran truckers protest fuel prices

On March 4, over 100 truck drivers blocked highways in eastern Honduras to protest the high cost of fuel. Erasmo Flores, president of the National Union of Heavy Equipment Operators (SNMEP), said the protest will continue until fuel costs come down. "We would rather go hungry standing in the street than go hungry working," said Flores.

Since 2001, gasoline prices have increase by 57.6 percent. Gasoline now costs US\$2.89 a gallon in Honduras, the highest price per gallon in Central America.

The administration of President Ricardo Maduro blames the high cost of fuel on world supply and demand and on the depreciation of the US dollar. Critics point out that government agencies that regulate the distribution of fuels add US\$362 in various taxes and tariffs; this represents nearly 50 percent of the price of fuels and other petroleum derivatives.

Support workers strike Illinois public school district

Some 170 educational support workers in the school district surrounding Moline, Illinois, walked out March 4 after union negotiators and the Moline-Coal Valley School Board broke off talks the previous night. Members of the Moline Educational Support Professionals Association (MESPA) picketed 10 separate facilities in the district to demand increased pay, better health benefits and seniority

rights.

MESPA has been working without a contract for eight months. The union has filed an unfair labor practice charge over the district's policy of paying replacement workers more than MESPA support teachers. The union also charges that the district is violating the state's Employment of Strikebreakers Act by contracting with an outside agency to replace striking nurses.

Meanwhile, the Illinois state legislature is considering a bill that would outlaw strikes during the school year, permitting them only during the summer break. The state of Wisconsin has already passed such legislation.

San Francisco airport screeners hold protest

Airport screeners and baggage handlers at San Francisco International Airport marched to the offices of the private contractor who employs their services to protest health care policies and demand that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) allow them to select the union of their choice.

In a recent union certification election, the NLRB refused to place the Service Employees International Union on the ballot, claiming it didn't qualify to represent screeners. Instead, the labor board substituted the United Screeners Association Local 1. Screeners at San Francisco's airport voted 582-200 against the new union.

One issue workers are concerned about is health care costs. Screener Gene Chan told the *Oakland Tribune* that health care coverage for a family of four costs workers \$6,000 a year.

Rutgers grad students and lecturers stage joint sit-in

Graduate students and part-time lecturers at Rutgers University in New Jersey staged a sit-in at the offices of campus president Richard McCormick to demand higher salaries to offset inflation that has eroded living standards.

In an exchange with McCormick, the two groups accused the president of seeking to sow divisions by asserting that if graduate students received raises, there would be insufficient funds to meet the demands of other faculty. The current starting salary for teaching assistants is \$14,300 per year. Part-time lecturers are paid \$850 a credit for each three-credit class they teach and average one-and-a-half classes per semester. Both groups of employees are represented by the American Association of University Professors and have been working without a contract since June 30.

Riot police used against CN strikers in Montreal

On March 5, management of Canadian National Railways (CN) called in a riot squad to stop 50 to 60 striking employees from blocking the entrance to a Montreal rail yard. The workers had been preventing transport trucks from making deliveries for several hours.

A spokesman for the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the

union representing the striking workers, said the union will file a complaint after two female picketers were "pushed around" by riot police the day before. The strike, which involves about 5,000 CN employees across Canada, was launched February 20 over working conditions and disciplinary measures by management.

Golf course workers stage protest picket

Twenty-one maintenance employees at Meadow Gardens Golf Course in Vancouver set up an informational picket line on February 28 to protest deteriorating work conditions and concession demands by their employer. The workers, who are currently in contract negotiations, are represented by Service Employees International Union Local 244.

Management has advanced 65 demands that among other things would weaken job security, make applying for health and welfare benefits more difficult and introduce a two-tiered wage grid that keeps wages lower than those of other workers in the same classification. Workers were skeptical of management's intentions at the bargaining table and after five brief meetings the company applied for a provincial mediator. Workers have also heard reports that management may be preparing a lockout.

Strike at Quebec City airport

Fifty workers at Jean-Lesage Airport in Quebec City, members of the Union of Canadian Transportation Employees (UCTE) Local 10140, walked off the job February 9 after many attempts to negotiate failed.

The union has been bargaining with management since the airport was privatized three years ago. Issues in dispute include overtime, holiday pay and length of contract—the employer wants an agreement that will extend until 2010. In addition, workers were offered a lump sum payment instead of retroactive pay for the past three years.

On February 2, the company fired two members accusing them, without evidence, of committing acts of sabotage. According to UCTE Regional vice-president for Quebec, Richard Côté, management is raising the accusations purely as a means of intimidation.



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