

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 March 2004

## Brazilian unions campaign for shorter workweek

Brazil's main trade union federations met on March 20 to launch a national campaign for a shorter workweek. Currently, workers work an eight-hour day five days a week and four hours on Saturdays, for a total of 44 hours. The unions favor a proposal to amend the Constitution to reduce the workweek first to 40 hours and eventually to 35 hours.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva has promised that 2004 would be a year of economic growth even though unemployment shot up almost one full percentage point in January to 11.7 percent (from December's 10.8 percent) after declining for several months. The unions argue that by shortening the workweek, 1.8 million more workers will be employed.

According to the Brazilian Adital news agency, a combination of high productivity and low hourly wages have made Brazilian per-unit labor costs 6.7 times lower than those in the United States and 2.7 lower than South Korea's. Millions of Brazilian workers live on less than US\$1 a day. Only Mexico has lower per-unit labor costs in Latin America. The proposed constitutional change would not affect Brazil's wage levels.

## Dock workers strike in Brazil

Workers at Brazil's main grain terminal in Paranagua, 400 kilometers (250 miles) south of São Paulo, began a strike on March 15 in a dispute regarding the inspection of genetically modified (GM) soybeans.

The state government in Parana State had prohibited the export of GM soybeans, and port authorities are required to inspect all shipments to prevent any from getting through. Loads with even a trace of GM soybeans are automatically turned back.

This has resulted in long delays, forcing truckers to deliver to more distant ports. As a result, 11,000 dockworkers, proprietors of nearby shops and truckers went on strike to protest what Wilson da Silva, leader of the dockworkers, called "an irrational and hostile management style by the port." The strikers are demanding the resignation of port manager Eduardo Requião, who also is the brother of the governor of Parana.

Brazil is one of the world's main suppliers of soybeans. However, inadequate port facilities create huge bottlenecks. Last year, trucks were lined up for 120 kilometers (70 miles) from Paranagua, and ships had to wait up to 22 days to load their cargo.

## Puerto Rican teachers threaten to strike

On March 16, the Puerto Rican Teachers Federation (FM) warned that the failure of Education Secretary Cesar Rey to negotiate with the union would lead to chaos this fall. FM President Rafael Feliciano indicated that he would convene an assembly of union delegates in August to map out strike strategies.

Puerto Rican law forbids teachers' strikes. In the event of a walkout, FM risks decertification. The teachers have declared that there exists a constitutional right to strike. At issue are work rules that regulate the functioning of the schools and other teaching issues. Rey has remained intransigent despite having been fined US\$6,000 by the Labor Relations Commission for failure to meet with union representatives as stipulated by the collective bargaining agreement. The education secretary insists that he is not obligated to include teachers in what he considers "management prerogatives."

## Teachers' hunger strike in Guatemala

Seventy-five temporary teachers declared themselves on hunger strike on March 15 demanding that the government change their status to permanent, a category that pays the same but includes health and pension benefits.

The hunger strikers were part of a protest at the Presidential Palace of 300 teachers that pressed the government on the same issue. When authorities refused to address their demand, the teachers initiated the hunger strike.

## Bank employees strike in Uruguay

Bank workers went on national strike in Uruguay on March 15 to protest the sacking of 134 workers at Banco de Credito, which is being liquidated.

Banco de Credito stocks are largely owned by the Uruguayan government (50 percent) and the right-wing Korean reverend Sun Myung Moon (48 percent). In 2002, the bank fell victim to a national financial crisis.

## Hunger strike by Coca Cola workers in eight Colombian cities

Thirty workers for Coca Cola bottlers in Colombia went on hunger strike to protest the firm's labor policies. The strike is taking place in tents in front of Coca Cola plants in Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Bucaramanga, Cucuta, Cartagena and Barrancabermeja.

More workers are scheduled to join the hunger strike in stages. Within the plants, the remaining workers will abstain from eating while on duty.

An official of the National Union of Food Industry Workers (SINALTRAINAL), Javier Correa, explained that the purpose of the strike is to condemn nationally and internationally Coca Cola's abuses of its own employees' rights.

More than 500 workers have been sacked and forced to sign resignation papers in addition to the 91 officially laid off with authorization from the Ministry of Social Protection. Paramilitary squads with ties to the firm have executed nine workers. Sixty-seven have been threatened, and several others were kidnapped and forced to relocate. A union office was also burned to the ground.

SINALTRAINAL is suing Coca Cola for human rights abuses in a Florida court. A SINALTRAINAL press release reports that the death squads have targeted even children of Coca Cola workers to silence union opposition and to force workers to resign and flee their homes and cities.

## New talks in Minnesota transit strike

A Minnesota state mediator has called negotiators for the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1005 and the Metropolitan Council back to the bargaining table as the strike by 2,200 bus drivers and mechanics in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro-region reaches the 19-day mark. Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty and council chairman Peter Bell are expected to continue to maintain their call for transit workers to carry a greater burden of health care costs and lower the starting wages for new hires.

Last week, Pawlenty expanded his plan to break the transit strike by offering up to US\$10,000 a week to dial-a-ride agencies that offer rides through reservations or on-call services. This comes on top of his Transit Grant Assistance Program, which is to provide US\$100,000 a week to reimburse non-profit agencies that provide transportation to people who are stranded by the strike.

The strikebreaking character of this maneuver was shown last week

when the board of the Minnesota Council of Non-Profits advised its members “against application for funding” and that “accepting funds from the parties to the current contract dispute would unwisely insert nonprofit organizations into the middle of the conflict.”

#### **Pilots’ union leaders propose wage cut at Northwest Airlines**

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) at Northwest Airlines has voted unanimously to back a US\$200 million concessions package to the company when it resumes negotiations. The cut would average about 20 percent of pilots’ salaries and benefits and extend to the end of 2006.

In February 2003, Northwest management demanded US\$1 billion in cuts from its workforce, with the 6,300 pilots being told they should contribute US\$442 million. Northwest has lost US\$2.2 billion over the last three years.

ALPA is presenting the concessions as an “investment.” Mark McClain, chairman of the Northwest pilots’ union, declared, “We believe an investment by NWA pilots can have a meaningful effect to help ensure NWA’s future success while also providing future benefits for NWA pilots.” The union has yet to spell out the details of the package, except to say it will not include layoffs.

#### **Hawaiian cement strikers pressed into concessions**

Workers at Hawaiian Cement on the Island of Oahu voted by a 2-1 margin to end their six-week strike against company demands for increased medical payments. The 67 mixer truck drivers and quarry workers, members of Teamsters Local 996, will see a US\$3.80 pension and wage increase package over the course of a five-year contract offset by a 20 percent increase in health insurance premiums. Previously, workers paid no premiums for their medical coverage.

A few hours before workers put the new tentative agreement to a vote, the Teamsters union bureaucracy brought in Hawaii’s Governor Linda Lingle to pressure workers to accept the settlement. Company vice president for Hawaiian Cement, Michael Coad, told the *Star Bulletin*, “She came down and spoke to the guys just prior to their ratification vote, and I know the governor to be a very convincing speaker.”

Meanwhile, Teamsters negotiators representing 144 cement workers at Ameron Hawaii Corp. have retreated from their position of no medical increases. The union has said it will agree to pay 10 percent of medical premium payments. Ameron has been pressing the union for a 30 percent hike in health care payments. Workers already pay 20 percent of medical premium costs. Ameron workers struck February 6, one day before Hawaiian Cement workers.

#### **Inquiry finds higher on-the-job death rate for Mexican immigrants**

The Associated Press has concluded an investigation that finds a Mexican worker laboring in southern and western United States is four times more likely to die on the job than a US-born worker.

The death rate for Mexican workers throughout the United States is 1 in 16,000, while US-born workers suffer a rate of 1 in 28,000. Mexican workers account for one out of 24 workers in the United States, while they account for one out of 14 on-the-job deaths.

Immigrant workers are filling positions doing some of the most dangerous work in construction and meatpacking. However, statistics show Mexican workers suffer a higher death rate than US-born workers even when employed at the same jobs. The AP report said the reasons include lack of job training and safety equipment, language barriers and an oppressive working environment that discourages complaints. Most accidents were considered preventable, but the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has failed to enforce workplace safety laws and prosecute corporate violators.

#### **Strike ends at Canadian National railway**

Workers ratified an agreement last week ending the month-long strike by 5,000 shop-craft, train yard and clerical workers at Canadian National railway (CN). The workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), had been on strike since February 20 for improvements in wages,

working conditions and changes in the disciplinary system.

The strike began when the workers voted to reject a proposed wage increase of 3 percent a year over three years, which had been recommended by the CAW. The new agreement contains an identical wage package. It also includes a return to the disciplinary system that was in place before January 2001, a C\$1,000 return-to-work bonus, a guarantee that there will be no discipline or reprisals for strike activity, and improvements to afternoon and midnight shift differentials as well as to vision care. Workers began returning to work Monday.

#### **Windsor casino workers vote to strike**

Thirty-four-hundred unionized workers at the Caboto Club in Windsor, Ontario voted overwhelmingly to strike if a deal is not reached before April 1. The workers are members of the Canadian Auto Workers and are seeking improvements in wages, benefits and work practices, as well as a pension plan exclusively funded by their employer.

Casino management has yet to present an economic proposal. It claims business has been hurt by cross-border congestion, due to security measures imposed at the Windsor-Detroit border, and other problems such as the SARS outbreak.

#### **Newfoundland Tories face public service strike**

The new Conservative provincial government of Danny Williams, which took office last fall, could face a strike by 30,000 public sector workers if a deal isn’t reached by March 31. The workers, including teachers, nurses and other government workers, are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which served a strike notice last week.

This is the first Tory government in the province in 15 years, but its popular support has dropped dramatically since it took office October 21. Since that time, the government has introduced a spending freeze followed by a wage freeze on public sector workers effective January 5. The last time workers went on strike in Newfoundland was in 2001, when the Liberal government of the day came close to declaring a state of emergency.

#### **Quebec Wal-Mart workers nearing first union contract**

A recent decision by the Quebec Labour Commission (QLC) has brought workers at the Wal-Mart outlet in Jonquière, Québec a step closer to becoming the first unionized store in North America. The ruling thwarted the company’s move to have management staff included in a unionization vote. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), which represents the workers, nevertheless expressed disappointment that the ruling didn’t go further and automatically grant union certification. A successful sign-up campaign was concluded last December, but the union still has to go through the process of union accreditation, which the company has hampered with numerous legal maneuvers. Wal-Mart is the largest private employer in the US with 1.16 million workers.



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