# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**30 March 2004**

**Ecuadorian workers strike over wages**

On March 26, Ecuadorian government workers completed a week of strikes over wages. Fourteen-thousand public health workers are demanding raises and an increase in funding for 1,300 public hospitals.

On Wednesday, March 24, protesting workers surrounded the Fomento Bank where President Lucio Gutierrez was celebrating his 47th birthday by handing out government loans. They did not allow him to leave for several hours. The workers charge that much of the money that owed to the hospitals was used to service the country's foreign debt. As a result, many clinics, unable to pay their bills, were left without electricity.

Meanwhile, public school teachers and university employees are threatening to mobilize in strike action to press for higher wages and a budget increase for their institutions.

**Dominican doctors on strike**

More than 10,000 Dominican doctors have been on an indefinite strike since March 22. The strikers work at 150 public and 23 Social Security Institute hospitals. On March 26, scores of doctors and nurses marched through the streets of Santo Domingo to press their demands.

At issue are low starting wages. Starting pay for public health doctors is 15,000 pesos a month ($350). The strikers are demanding a 100 percent raise. Dominican President Hipolito Mejia has declared that the government does not have funds for raises.

Faced with a severe economic downturn and a balance-of-payments crisis, President Mejia recently signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund imposing austerity measures and severely limiting government spending on social needs.

**Bolivian unions end truce**

The Bolivian Workers Central (COB) leader Jaime Solares indicated that his organization has abandoned the informal truce it has had with President Carlos Mesa since he took office in October 2003. The COB announced March 25 that it is willing to enter talks with the government, but it will not abandon its demands for socioeconomic improvements.

**Mexican union bureaucrats in shoot-out over oil workers' union hall**

On March 23, gunmen took over the headquarters of the oil workers union in the city of Villahermosa, State of Tabasco. The group represented a section of the notoriously corrupt bureaucracy, headed by Raul Becerra de Dios.

More than 100 gunmen burst into the building firing submachine guns the day after the leader of a competing faction of the bureaucracy, Ignacio Flores Correa, was released from prison.

Twenty oil workers, a cleaning woman and a security guard were inside the building at the time. The security guard was wounded and hospitalized.

The union had been in the hands of the Correa faction since last August 14 as a result of disputed union elections. Correa claims that Becerra is being supported by former leader of section 14 of the union who ruled for 12 years, during which he became fabulously wealthy.

**Talks break off in Minnesota transit strike**

A seven-hour negotiating session on March 22 between the union representing 2,200 striking Minneapolis-St. Paul transit workers and the Metropolitan Council broke off after management refused to consider an offer by leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1005. Metro Transit General Manager Mike Setzer angrily denounced the union's proposal and refused to make a counteroffer. The talks, representing the first bargaining session since workers walked out on March 4, underscore the determination of Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and Met Council chairman Peter Bell to wear down the strikers.

The ATU submitted a proposal asking for a 5 percent wage increase over two years—1 percent lower than the union's 6 percent offer last December—as opposed to the Met Council's demand for a wage freeze in the first year of the contract, followed by a 1 percent increase in the second year. The ATU did concede to the Met Council's demand that new hires will only reach top pay after seven years compared to the present five-year progression. However, management is demanding starting pay be reduced to 60 percent of top pay, which is $21.80 an hour, whereas the union wants to keep it at 70 percent. On the most critical issues of wiping out health care coverage for retirees and the Met Council's demand for heavy increases in workers' portion of health care costs, there was no change.

**Ruling by federal judge clears way for Caterpillar to use strikebreakers**

Federal judge Joe McDade ruled that parts of Illinois' Employment of Strikebreakers Act, which bans the use so-called replacement workers during strikes, would cause irreparable harm to companies and violate their constitutional rights. The decision came after Caterpillar workers at seven manufacturing sites in Illinois voted overwhelmingly to strike the heavy-equipment maker.

Last July, Caterpillar sued to bar the state from enforcing the act as the April 1, 2004, contract expiration date came into focus. An attorney representing Illinois state attorneys said McDade didn't need to rule because there was at this point no strike. A final ruling by McDade on the law has been delayed until later this year.

**Southern California grocery workers forced to revote and ratify concessions**

Grocery workers for Gelson's were compelled by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) to revote and accept concessions last week after having rejected them the week before. The contract was the same agreement imposed in the settlement of the four-month strike at Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons. Grocery workers at both Gelson's and Stater Bros. are covered by that agreement, but Gelson's workers reserved the right to reject the contract. Following the rejection, the UFCW met with company officials, and a new vote was taken over March 24 and 25.

The forced revote highlights the treacherous role of the UFCW bureaucracy, which systematically isolated the four-month grocery strike before it was defeated.

**Grand Central Oyster Bar strike ends**

On strike since December 5, 2003, the union representing almost 100 workers has reached a deal with the management of the Grand Central Oyster Bar and Restaurant in New York City. Ending the longest restaurant strike in Manhattan in five years, restaurant management and Local 100 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union issued a statement Thursday night saying that the union members voted to accept the agreement. The statement also said that the union joins "with management in inviting New Yorkers and visitors to come to the Oyster Bar and celebrate a new beginning."

The workers struck after management proposed a combination of givebacks on the overwhelmingly immigrant workforce, including imposing a wage freeze, reducing the wages and benefits of new hires, hiring more part-timers, cutting overtime pay, eliminating holidays, cutting health insurance, and eliminating what the restaurant contributes to the workers' pensions.

The restaurant managed to stay open during the strike with a combination of union members who did not walk out and replacement workers. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority placed a limit on the number of strikers who were allowed to stand near the restaurant appealing to potential customers not to go in. Most strikers had to stay outside the terminal in the winter cold. Despite these difficulties, strikers said the business of the restaurant dropped dramatically.

Neither management nor the union would provide details of the pact, but according to press reports, the waiters will not get a raise for the three years of the contract. Although starting wages for dishwashers were not lowered, management did obtain its goal of not increasing its pension contributions.

**Kelsey campus instructors begin rotating strikes**

On March 24, instructors at the Kelsey campus of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) in Saskatoon commenced rotating strikes. They are demanding pay equity, extended health benefits, and improved workload and pensions. In February and March, they voted 75 percent in favor of strike action.

Eleven-hundred instructors at four campuses of SIAST, represented by the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union, have been without a contract since June and have been attempting to negotiate a new collective agreement since March 2003. Bargaining broke off March 11, when management refused to discuss wages and called for more concessions.

**Strike at University of Quebec in Gatineau**

Part-time instructors at the University of Québec in Gatineau walked off the job Monday, March 22. The instructors, who teach 60 percent of courses at the university are paid far less than their full-time counterparts and had been demanding a pay increase of approximately 50 percent. Recently, the president of their union has indicated a willingness to settle for less, referring to the recent settlement by part-time instructors at the Chicoutimi campus as a precedent.

**Strike ends at Hershey Canada**

The strike by 500 employees of Hershey Canada in Smiths Falls, Ontario, ended March 13 after five weeks. The workers, members of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 462, were demanding an improved pension plan. The new three-year agreement includes a provision that the company will divert some funds for retirement benefits, as well as grant wage increases. The workers voted 92 percent in favor of ratification.