

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 April 2004

Argentine workers mark anniversary of 1976 coup

The 28th anniversary of the military coup that resulted in the disappearance of 30,000 citizens was marked by a massive demonstration in Rosario, Argentina's third largest city, on March 25.

Over 10,000 people belonging to labor, student and political organizations marched from San Martin square in the center of the city to the Monument to the Flag on the shores of the Parana River. The size of the crowd exceeded expectations and indicated scars from that era have yet to heal.

Leading the march were relatives of the disappeared. Other participants included steelworkers, meat packing workers and public employees. A large delegation was present from the steel mill at nearby Villa Constitucion, where workers played an important role in opposing the military and many were kidnapped and killed by the regime.

The crowd overflowed the Flag Monument as marchers holding banners and playing drums kept arriving. Speakers at the rally condemned government inaction in the defense of human rights, state repression and the neo-liberal economic policies blamed for the current economic crisis. The demonstration also demanded a full accounting of the disappeared and of those killed by security forces on December 19 and 20, 2001, when mass demonstrations in Buenos Aires forced the resignation of President De la Rúa.

Speakers also denounced the US invasion of Iraq, the installation of US military bases in Latin America and US intervention in Colombia and Venezuela.

Uruguayan teachers strike over wages

On March 25, high school and technical school teachers carried out a 24-hour work stoppage to demand more funding for schools and higher wages. The strike was called by a coalition of teachers and professors unions in the public and private sector.

Employees at the Labor University (UTU) also joined the strike. The professors at that technical university demanded that the government of Jorge Batlle allocate US\$70 million that was approved by congress in 2000, which the Ministry of Economics and Finance has yet to hand over to the schools.

The workers also called for the rejection of a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to the schools because it imposes conditions unacceptable to the teachers.

Peruvian dockworkers strike

Peruvian longshore workers carried out a surprise strike on April 1 at the port of El Callao, Peru's main port. This is the second time this year that the stevedores went on strike. At issue is the demand by these dockworkers that they be given permanent employment status, which would make them eligible for social benefits.

Dockworkers are currently employed on a temporary as needed basis. The dockworkers union is demanding that available work be rotated among these employees.

In solidarity with the longshore workers, crane operators have respected the picket lines. Felix Elias, president of the stevedore's union, declared that the union intends to extend the strike to other Peruvian ports.

Nissan workers strike in Mexico

Seventeen hundred workers at the Cuernavaca Nissan plant in Mexico

went on strike April 1 demanding that the firm rescind the layoff of 600 workers at the plant. The one-day strike ended with an agreement to raise wages and benefits by 5 percent and implement a four-day workweek in return for sacrificing the 600 jobs. The wage increase only partially compensates the loss in pay from having to work one less day a week.

The agreement allows Nissan to cut production in response to falling demand from the United States and Mexico. The plant produces the Tsuru subcompact, one of the most popular cars in Mexico. The plant also produces engines and pickup trucks. Nissan owns two plants in Mexico. In addition to the Tsuru, Nissan also manufactures Renault cars and the Sentra model at another plant in Aguascalientes. Wages at the Cuernavaca plant vary from US\$17.60 to US\$35.21 per day.

The Mexican auto industry has been depressed during the last two years, suffering from a drop in sales in the United States. This has resulted in layoffs and shortened hours of work for thousands of workers. Nissan employs 8,000 workers in Mexico. Forty percent of its cars are exported to the United States.

Buenos Aires transit strike

On April 1, transit workers on the underground metro trains that serve Buenos Aires went on strike to protest union inaction over working conditions. The workers stopped work to reject a labor agreement made by their own union with the private operator of the trains, Metrovias.

The strikers accuse the leadership of the Union of Motorized Railways (UTA) of abandoning sacked workers. In addition, the striking workers are demanding that more ticket takers be contracted. The system is being expanded, but Metrovias plans to install passenger operated ticket machines.

Retired Bolivian miner blows himself up in protest over pension

Eustaquio Picachuri, a 47-year old Bolivian miner, blew himself up March 30 to protest the denial of pension benefits for himself and two relatives. Picachuri had worked 14 years for the Bolivian Mining Corporation, where he was sacked in 1992. The miner, described as desperate, had entered the legislative building in La Paz with eight sticks of dynamite strapped to his body. His explosion killed two guards that were negotiating with him, and damaged the building. Ten other police officers were wounded.

Before setting off the charge, Picachuri declared that he was no assassin, nor a terrorist, but that had decided to die if he did not get his money. He had been fighting for over five years for a pension for himself, his wife and his brother under a provision in the law that allows chronically unemployed workers to apply for benefits.

Miguel Zubietta, leader of an organization of former miners that seek early retirement, denounced the government for being blind to workers' petitions. A former miner that spoke to the Associated Press declared that other miners may emulate Picachuri.

Picachuri's death brought out the sympathy of hundreds of thousands of Bolivians angry at the state of the Bolivian Pension System. Thousands of workers have announced that they will march from the mining region to La Paz in solidarity with Picachuri's protest. About 35,000 retired workers have been "sandwiched" by the privatization of the pension system in 1996. Ineligible to receive a state pension, they never worked enough hours to qualify for a private pension, due to the wave of layoffs

in the tin mines during the 1980s from which they never recovered. The group is known as the “sandwich generation.”

A succession of Bolivian regimes, including that of President Carlos Mesa, has callously ignored the plight of these workers. In a comment on the worker’s suicide, Mesa declared that this had not been a political act. Mesa also stated last week that the government was in default and could not afford to attend to unlawful requests.

The 1996 law established individual accounts for workers. The state agreed to pay for existing pensions, borrowing from the private administrators of the new accounts. Service payments for those loans account for over 40 percent of the government’s deficit. The 1996 law also raised retirement age to 65 for workers with 20 years on the job. Previous to 1996, a worker needed only 15 years of contributions. Felix Condarco, leader of the unemployed miners, pointed out that Bolivian tin miners rarely make it to 65 years of age. “They begin to spit blood much before that,” said Condarco.

The majority of workers that retire in Bolivia are condemned to slow starvation. Ninety-five percent of the 133,000 retired workers receive less than US\$500 per month. Many receive as little as US\$100.

SBC contract extended

The Communications Workers of America agreed to extend its master contract with SBC Corporation Saturday night. This is despite the fact the telecommunications giant is still pressing its demands for increased employee contributions for health benefits and the right to outsource jobs to lower-paying contractors and foreign countries. The master CWA contract—the largest labor contract being negotiated in the US this year—covers roughly 100,000 of SBC’s 175,000 employees across the company’s nationwide system. The CWA also ordered its members to continue work after the contract covering former Pacific Bell employees in California expired April 1.

“They want to charge us more for our health care and they don’t want to guarantee our work,” a CWA spokesman said, “They want to be able to send the work out of state or send it out of the country.”

SBC, which is the country’s second largest telecommunications company, has expanded over the past year, following two years of huge losses caused largely by an erosion of the company’s core business, land line residential telephone systems. SBC has moved into broadband, satellite television, Internet systems, and wireless fidelity, and is a part owner of Cingular Wireless, the nation’s largest cell phone company.

The CWA, which has agreed to federal mediation, will provide SBC with at least 30 days notice of any strike. While the CWA says “informational pickets” may be erected at SBC offices, it has not notified the company of any intent to strike.

Scandal over failure to compensate sick workers from nuclear weapons plants

Energy Department officials admitted before the Senate Energy Committee that a four-year-old program set up to compensate ill workers who labored at nuclear weapons plants has spent \$74 million but that only one worker has received payment, netting a check for \$15,000.

Testimony revealed that the Energy Department contracted the compensation program out to the New Orleans-based Science and Engineering Associates. The government doled out \$16.7 million to the firm through November of 2003 and continues to pay an average \$1 million a month to the private contractor.

Science and Engineering Associates CEO Bobby Savoie refused to provide the Senate Committee details of its expenses, claiming the information is privileged and the company could be sued for releasing it.

Some 22,000 workers from Energy Department facilities in nine states applied for compensation. Of those, a mere 372 received feedback concerning their cases, with only a single worker from Washington state receiving compensation.

Tentative agreement for remaining Hawaiian cement strikers

A tentative agreement was reached April 2 between the Teamsters union and company negotiators for Ameron Hawaii Corporation in the two-month strike by cement workers on the island of Oahu. The five-year contract proposal calls for a one-dollar raise during the first two years followed by an 80-cent raise in the third year and two 70-cent raises in the final two years.

Ameron Hawaii workers will continue to pay 20 percent of their medical co-payments during the contract’s first two years, then a hike to 25 percent in the third year and 30 percent over the remaining two years.

Workers at another cement company, Hawaiian Cement, ratified their contract the previous week and will accept a 20 percent share of co-payments where they previously paid nothing. Meanwhile, workers who struck Ameron’s California plants located in Rancho Cucamonga and Etiwanda ended their strikes with contracts calling for a 30 percent medical co-payment premium.

Lockout at Connecticut gun manufacturer’s plant

Colt’s Manufacturing locked out 350 workers at its West Hartford, Connecticut, plant April 1 after workers unanimously rejected the company’s final contract offer. The old agreement between Colt and United Autoworkers Local 376 expired the previous night.

Carlton Chen, vice president and general council for Colt, defended the lockout, declaring, “The demands that they are making are impossible to meet.” Local 376 has not commented on the lockout.

Eight agricultural workers killed in transit from work

At least eight agricultural workers from Mexico were killed and another two injured when the vehicle transporting them from orange groves to their residences in Fort Pierce, Florida, went out of control and rolled over several times, throwing the workers from the vehicle.

The workers were from a group of some 19 immigrant workers making the 43-mile one-way commute to Fort Pierce at the end of the day. Six of the workers died immediately at the scene of the accident while two others died after being rushed to Lanwood Medical Center.

UAW extends talks with Caterpillar

The United Auto Workers extended its contract for an indefinite duration with Peoria, Illinois-based Caterpillar, the world’s largest maker of construction equipment. The contract, which covers more than 8,000 active Caterpillar employees at seven plants and more than 20,000 retirees, expired March 31. Negotiations have been ongoing since December 10.

During the 1990s Caterpillar imposed massive concessions on its employees and sustained two strikers, which were isolated and betrayed by the UAW bureaucracy. The UAW represents workers at Caterpillar plants in East Peoria, Illinois; Denver; York, Pennsylvania; Memphis, Tennessee; Montgomery, Illinois; Decatur, Illinois; and Pontiac, Illinois.

Casino Windsor workers strike

Casino Windsor was shut down April 3 after 3,500 workers struck the gaming facility in the Canadian city across the river from Detroit in a walkout for improved wages and benefits. Management at the casino, which is operated by Hilton Hotels, said it would not resume negotiations with the Canadian Auto Workers Local 44 unless it knew the union would make concessions.

“Just because there are a lot of demands on the table,” it “doesn’t mean that we have to sit there and continue to give and give and give things that we don’t think we need to give, and we don’t want to give and we shouldn’t give,” said Casino Windsor lawyer George King.

The CAW has called the casino’s proposal for a \$1.15-per-hour wage increase over the next three years unacceptable.

Lockout ends for Ontario social workers

On April 2, outreach counselors at Yellow Brick House shelter in the small town of Aurora ratified a new collective agreement bringing to an end a 69-day lockout by their employer. Management had locked out the counselors and closed the center to shelter residents in a dispute around

the issue of workplace reorganization. In response, the 38 counselors, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3636, set up a picket line outside the shelter. The new three-year deal includes a new salary scale with wage increases of between 2 and 10 percent.

Union loses again at Quebec Wal-Mart

In an extremely narrow vote on April 2, 74 of 143 employees at a Wal-Mart store in Jonquière, Quebec, opted against joining the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW). Sixty-five people voted in favor of unionizing and four ballots were invalidated.

Wal-Mart, which relies on low labor costs, has waged a long-standing campaign to keep its stores free of unionized labor. The April 2 victory is Wal-Mart's second in a year in Canada, after the failure of a campaign of workers in Thompson, Manitoba, last year in June.



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