

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 April 2004

## Colombian workers end hunger strike

SINALTRAINAL, the union representing workers in the plants that bottle Coca Cola in Colombia, announced March 27 it was suspending a hunger strike after the union said an agreement was reached with management. The strike lasted for 276 hours.

On April 2, delegates from all the plants involved in the conflict will meet with management. Coca Cola agreed not to take reprisals against the participants in the hunger strike and will revoke sanctions already imposed. The company also agreed to give two-weeks paid leave to the hunger strikers so they can recover physically. Advertising space will be bought demanding that paramilitary forces refrain from killing workers.

Coca Cola workers have been routinely targeted by right-wing death squads allied with the Colombian military and plant management.

## Strike ends in Peruvian port

On April 8, dockworkers returned to work at Callao, Peru's busiest port. "We decided to lift the strike when the companies promised to formalize workers' contracts, though some of the firms are not doing so," declared Carlos Vivanco, general secretary of the El Callao local of the National Federation of Port and Maritime Workers (FEMAPOR.) According to Vivanco, some of the 35 companies that hire longshore workers have brought in strikebreakers and were threatening to blacklist striking workers.

At issue is the demand that stevedores, now hired on an as-needed basis, be hired permanently, with full government benefits, and that the available work be equitably distributed among all the 1,030 members of the union. According to Vivanco, 35 companies load and unload ships at El Callao. FEMAPOR intends to resume the strike after Easter Sunday if employers continue to ignore the agreement.

Last week, strikers were under government pressure to go back to work. The administration of President Alejandro Toledo warned that the closure of the port would result in rerouting of shipments to other ports, with a consequent economic loss. This is the third time in less than a year that workers have struck this port. Three thousand crane operators joined the strike in solidarity with the longshore workers.

## Buenos Aires subway workers' strike ends in partial victory for workers

A four-day strike by Buenos Aires subway workers ended

April 6. The strike began when union delegates repudiated an agreement between the national leaders of the Motorized Rail Workers Union (UTA) and Metrovias, the private agency that runs the urban service.

Initially, Metrovias had responded to the strike by threatening to fire a group of about 50 workers that it claimed blocked the tracks and prevented the movement of trains.

The workers returned to their jobs after Metrovias management said it would abandon the agreement, reduced the working day to six hours and agreed not to punish any of the strikers. Workers had demanded a shorter workday as compensation for unhealthy working conditions.

The main demand of underground workers is that Metrovias not use automated ticket machines. The dissident union delegates insisted that, given conditions of high unemployment, the use of labor-saving technology meant the destruction of jobs. Metrovias did not give in on that issue, but agreed to establish a joint committee with the UTA to study the use of these machines.

Over 4.7 million workers are currently unemployed in Argentina.

## Peruvian brewery workers strike

Workers at Backus y Johnston, Peru's only beer producer, went on strike March 18 at the company's Ate brewery in Lima. The plant normally employs 310 workers, who produce about a million liters of beer per day, 60 percent of the firm's output. At issue was the workers' demand for a pay increase of 155 soles (about \$43) per month to compensate for an increase in the cost of living. The workers were also demanding a productivity bonus.

The strike ended on April 7 with an agreement of 2.80 soles per day, 60 soles for a 22-day month, plus a productivity bonus.

## Brazilian football players on strike

On April 6, players for the Botafogo-SP team went on strike to protest delays in the payment of their salaries. The players are owed two-and-a-half months' pay.

Some of the players indicated they would compromise with the insolvent team and accept partial payment. However, late negotiations did not produce a satisfactory agreement.

## New talks in Minnesota transit strike

Transit management and union negotiators for 2,200 striking bus drivers and mechanics will hold a new set of negotiations April 12 as the strike by Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1005 enters its sixth week. The decision by the

Metropolitan Council came after Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty held a secret seven-hour meeting on April 7 with ATU President Ron Lloyd.

The meeting followed legislative activity in both the Minnesota House and Senate. The Democratic-dominated Senate voted to force binding arbitration on the strike. In the Republican-dominated House, a Republican bill seen as a step toward the privatization of the transit system was defeated 78-54. Another bill offered by a Democratic Farmer-Labor (DFL) representative to impose the old expired contract was defeated 73-58.

The House transit bill, calling for a \$3 million cut in 2005 and another \$12 million cut in 2007, survived, indicating the legislature as a whole remains firm in its insistence that workers must absorb cuts in wages, benefits and working conditions in order to maintain the transit system.

#### **Casino workers protest working conditions**

Some 300 casino workers and their supporters blocked the street in front of Spa Resort Casino in Palm Springs, California, to protest working conditions, low pay and a lack of benefits, and to win support for their demand for a union. Police moved in and arrested about two-dozen protesters, including Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers.

"I'm tired of seeing a lot of my coworkers go to work in fear," Sajid Roman, a Spa Resort Casino worker, told the *Desert Sun*. Workers claim that they have been harassed and intimidated after complaining about working conditions and raising the issue of unionization. Among the complaints are charges of sexual harassment, age bias and favoritism.

The casino is run by the Agua Caliente tribe. The demonstration comes amid secret negotiations between California tribes and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to renew sections of legal agreements that permit 61 tribes to operate casinos in the state.

#### **Airline management fails to warn workers of bomb threat to plane**

Three unions at Northwest Airlines have filed grievances charging management failed to inform workers that a plane landing at Detroit's Metropolitan Airport was the target of an alleged bomb threat. While passengers were evacuated from the plane, workers, unaware of the circumstances, approached the plane to perform their tasks.

"I had some really irate mechanics because they just walked right up to this airplane," Bob Rose, president of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), told the Associated Press. AMFA, whose contract states workers are to be promptly notified of a threat to an airplane, filed grievances along with the Professional Flight Attendants Association and the International Association of Machinists.

The March 30 incident at Detroit involved only one of three Northwest planes that were the subject of bomb threats. Another plane was searched in Los Angeles, and a third was given two separate searches in Memphis and Miami.

#### **Police arrests in Pittsburgh protest over fired janitors**

Thirty-six janitors and their supporters were arrested April 8 at Pittsburgh's downtown Centre City Tower's lobby during a protest over building management's decision last year to switch to a nonunion contractor and get rid of nine unionized janitors. About 130 supporters of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 3 entered the building in the early morning hours and laid down on the lobby's floor.

Protesters chanted "No justice, no peace" and held signs reading "Starving for Janitors," which referred to a hunger strike that was launched four days earlier by Gabe Morgan, an SEIU official, and Harriet Bryant, one of the fired janitors. The hunger strike and protest were ended later in the day after Chief County Executive Dan Onorato called for mediation between the SEIU and Independent Management.

Independent Management reacted to the offer by declaring it had no bargaining relationship with the SEIU. Last year, the SEIU negotiated a citywide contract with downtown Pittsburgh building managers that included health benefits. When the contract between Centre City Tower and the cleaning company St. Moritz Building Services expired, Centre City Tower hired a new nonunion cleaning service that didn't rehire the nine previous union janitors and doesn't provide health benefits.

#### **Newfoundland public sector workers reject offer**

Striking public sector workers in Newfoundland and Labrador have rejected the province's latest offer. The 20,000 workers walked off the job April 1 in the face of the Tory provincial government's concession demands, which included a two-year wage freeze and the elimination of 4,000 jobs. The workers are represented by the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

In an attempt to bait the striking workers, Tory premier Danny Williams had earlier insinuated that strikers were at fault in a barroom altercation with his son. A 23-year-old with no relation to the striking workers has since been arrested in connection with the incident, and the unions have demanded an apology from the premier for his defamatory statements.

No further talks were planned for the weekend.

#### **Cape Breton municipal workers vote to strike**

One-hundred-fifteen inside workers for the Cape Breton Regional Municipality recently voted 96 percent in favor of strike action. The main issues for the workers are wages, hours of work and the length of the proposed contract. The workers, whose contract expired October 31, 2003, are represented by Local 933 of the CUPE and will probably be in a legal strike position by early May of this year.



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