

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 April 2004

## Chilean dock workers strike against port privatization

Workers at the northern Chilean port of Arica are on a strike of indefinite duration against the privatization of the port. The work stoppage began on April 12. The union is demanding severance payments and social benefits for workers that would be sacked as a result of the takeover of the port by a private company.

The government of Ricardo Lagos is accelerating the sale of the port to the private sector and the complete transfer will be carried out over the next few months. Parts of the port have already been contracted out.

Dock workers in Puerto Valparaiso briefly blocked the port in solidarity with their northern brothers.

## Brazilian teachers protest over wages and working conditions

On April 15, thousands of striking teachers in the state of Rio Grande do Sul and their supporters marched through the streets of Porto Alegre demanding the government address their wage demands. Among those participating in the march were students, agricultural workers and trade unionists associated with the United Workers Central (CUT).

The teachers have been on strike since March 26 and are asking for a 28 percent raise in wages and a 10 percent increase in lunch vouchers. According to union sources, the government's latest offer is a 25 percent raise contingent on the approval of a new budget. The increase would not take effect until September. Jucara Veira, president of the Teacher's Center of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (CPERS), rejected the offer, saying that the teachers cannot possibly wait. State education secretary Jose Fortunati declared that while the teachers' demands are justified, the state lacks the funds to raise wages.

In the State of Santa Catarina, teachers walked out on April 13, demanding a 45 percent wage increase. Santa Catarina teachers earn between US\$120 and US\$355 per month.

## Farmworkers march in Brazil

On April 14, agricultural workers began a march from sugar fields and fruit plantations in northeastern Pernambuco on Recife, the state capital, to demand land reform. The march is part of the "Red April" campaign of the Landless Movement (MST). The main column departed from the town of Caruaru, 150 kilometers from Recife. Along the road satellite marches from other communities will join the demonstration. The marchers represent 8,000 families that have occupied land in the state.

## Colombian oil workers threaten to strike

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe invited leaders of the Workers Syndical Union (USO) to Colombia's government house, the Narino Palace, to try resolving a 17-month-long impasse between the USO and Ecopetrol, the nation's oil company. The USO has declared its intent to organize a strike against Ecopetrol.

USO has called on oil workers to prepare for a strike at the Barrancabermeja oil refinery. It has asked for support from the trade union movement to oppose company plans to lay off workers and to

defend workers against attacks by the army and paramilitary forces.

## Argentine central bank employees strike

Argentine central bank workers went on a five-hour strike April 15 to demand a 250 peso raise (US\$82). Bank workers are also demanding a shorter workday. The protest strike resulted from the "refusal of Central Bank President Alfonso Prat Gay to adjust salaries in line with what other bank workers have," according to Bank Workers Union (AB) President Eduardo Berrozpe.

## Mexican workers march in defense of Social Security

On April 15 tens of thousands of workers, members and supporters of the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) marched along the streets of Mexico City's historic neighborhoods, demanding a "solidarity and a national pact" to defend their retirement rights and pensions.

Marching with the SNTSS workers were members of the National Workers Union (UNT) and the Mexican Syndicalist Front (FSM.) SNTSS officials declared that, while they are not against negotiations, any attempt to tamper with the present system would provoke a national strike. They asked workers to create "resistance" fronts to defend Social Security. The government is proposing to increase the age of retirement, demanding that workers work a minimum of 35 years before retiring and calling for increases in workers' contributions, in steps, from 3 percent to 15 percent of wages.

Thousands of demonstrators marched chanting "shame, shame," a reference to the government's charges that workers' excessive demands have bankrupted the system. The present system is US\$36 billion short of what is required to pay for pension benefits for 120,000 retired workers and future retirement for 350,000 active employees. A leaflet distributed during the demonstration compared the monthly salary of the head of the Social Security Institute (US\$20,000) with those of a public health doctor (US\$1,700) and a specialized public health nurse (US\$960).

Other demonstrations took place across Mexico. In Monterrey, Mexico's third largest city, a protest of 10,000 union members walked over 8 kilometers. In the city of Toluca, west of Mexico City, another demonstration took place. About 1,000 SNTSS members supported by electrical and telephone workers marched on the city's civic square. In the Caribbean port of Veracruz, 5,000 workers marched with banners denouncing President Vicente Fox and the Social Security management, demanding that the Institute be audited to uncover "decades of theft." In Culiacan, Sinaloa state, workers blamed the Social Security crisis on Fox's commitment to the privatization of national industries and demanded more government resources for health programs. Other marches took place in the states of Guerrero, Queretaro, Hidalgo and Chiapas.

Absent from the marches was the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), Mexico's largest trade union federation. CTM leader Leonardo Rodriguez Alacaine denounced the protests as "simply, a demagogic act."

### **Doctors strike in Peru**

Public health doctors, members of the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP), went on strike in Peru on April 12. The doctors are demanding more funds for public hospitals and clinics. In Lima, striking physicians marched and rallied to publicize their demands.

FMP President Luis Paredes declared that doctors are not fighting for a wage increase. "We are fighting for an increase in the national health budget, which is cut every year, even though the population is constantly on the rise."

### **Washington state teachers ratify new two-year contract**

Marysville, Washington teachers ratified a two-year agreement April 15 by a 382 to 101 margin that will freeze their pay the first year and provide a 1.5 percent raise the second. Last fall members of the Marysville Education Association voted by 98 percent to reject concessions and struck for 49 days—a state record, only returning under the compulsion of a court order. Teachers originally pressed for an 11 percent wage increase while the district wanted to freeze wages, increase the number of work days and do away with the local pay schedule in order to substitute a cheaper state-wide format.

The hard-line position of the school board caused a backlash among teachers and parents and led to the removal of three school board members, with another two facing possible recall. School superintendent Linda Whitehead spent \$400,000 from the treasury of the ailing school district on security guards during the course of the strike, recently vacating her post after having the remaining two-and-a-half years of her contract bought out for \$340,000.

In the wake of the strike the new school board has received a list of \$1.5 million worth of recommended budget cuts. The worsening economic position of the school district is expected to require deeper cuts in the months ahead.

### **Columbia graduate students to strike for union recognition**

Graduate students at Columbia University are to walk out April 19 after the teaching and research assistants voted to take action by an 80 percent margin. "We're not going to do anything until they recognize our union," Dermot Ryan told the *New York Times*.

Columbia graduate students voted to unionize back in 2002 in what was believed to be a successful certification vote. However, the university's administration blocked the counting of ballots through an appeal to the National Labor Relations Board. Since that time the NLRB has not ruled on the case. The present strike is aimed at compelling the university to agree to the dropping of the NLRB appeal or the holding of a new vote.

Alan Brinkley, Columbia's provost and a noted historian on Roosevelt's New Deal, said the university has plans in place to weather an indefinite strike, adding there is "nothing to negotiate."

### **US Airways pilots oust two union officials as concessions talks approach**

Members of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) at US Airways ousted two of the union's negotiators April 16 and demanded the union prepare to take a tougher line with airline management. The change comes as US Airways and ALPA prepare to discuss the airline's call to slash another \$1.5 billion in order to survive financially.

Among the two replacements is Doug Mowery, a former union leader from Philadelphia, who made a previous attempt last month to remove ALPA chairman Bill Pollock. The ouster this month coincided with a report last week that US Airways CEO David Siegel's 2003 compensation ranged between \$8 million and \$9 million, including a \$600,000 base salary.

### **Investigations into dangerous vapors at Washington state nuclear site**

State and federal officials have begun investigations at the Hanford nuclear site in Washington State after allegations were made that workers lack proper protection from chemical vapors.

The Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, in a 1997 draft report, determined that workers' risk of cancer from exposure to chemical vapors at the site could be as high as 1.6 in 10. Normally the rate for contracting cancer in the industry is one out of every 10,000 workers.

The Hanford site near Richland, Washington, made plutonium used in US nuclear weapons for 40 years. It is considered the nation's most contaminated site. Presently, a \$50-60 billion cleanup is under way to remove some 53 million gallons of radioactive liquid, sludge and salt cake that is being stored in 177 underground tanks. As many as 1,200 chemicals have been identified in the site's tanks. CH2M Hill, the company contracted to clean up the site, denies any worker has received a toxic dose of chemicals. However, the company admits that three chemicals capable of causing cancer—ammonia, nitrous oxide and butanol—exist in levels exceeding occupation exposure limits.

### **Barge and tugboat strike in Vancouver**

Eight hundred barge and tugboat operators, members of Canadian Merchant Service Guild, launched a strike in Vancouver on April 15 following the failure of contract negotiations with the Council of Marine Carriers.

Ken Herbert, secretary treasurer for the guild, said they have been in negotiation since June 2003 and that the guild's bargaining committee had engaged in 35 days of bargaining without resolution. The main issue in the dispute is pay equity with deckhands and cooks working on tugboats.

The guild is seeking a package of wage increases and health benefits totaling about 16 percent over three years, but the council is offering only about 13.75 percent. The last major strike in the coastal barge industry was in 1970 and lasted six weeks.

### **Saskatchewan science institute resumes strike**

More than 1,000 unionized instructors resumed strike action April 13 at all four campuses of Saskatchewan Institute of Science and Technology (SIASST)—in Regina, Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Moose Jaw—after the government rejected a tentative deal that had been reached the previous week. The educators are demanding pay equity, extended health benefits and improved workload and pensions.

The instructors, represented by the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union (SGEU), have been attempting to negotiate a new collective agreement since March 2003. They previously engaged in a series of rotating strikes when bargaining broke off March 11.



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