Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 April 2004

Family of Coca-Cola union leader machine-gunned

On April 7 a Colombian death squad struck at the family of a Coca-Cola union leader, killing two adults and wounding three children. Armed with machine guns, the men entered the home of the brother of Coca-Cola union leader Efrain Guerrero's wife in Bucaramanga, and fired indiscriminately. Guerrerro's brother-in-law, Gabriel Remolina, was shot dead together with his wife Fanny. Three of their children were wounded. One, Robinson Remolina, is in grave condition in the hospital.

Shortly before the killings, lawyers for the Coke workers had announced that they had filed a case against Coca-Cola in the United States for acts of antiunion violence in Colombia. A group of 91 workers was dismissed in February when Coca-Cola closed several plants. After a union-led hunger strike in March, management agreed to negotiate a transfer of the union members slated for layoff.

During the protest, groups affiliated with the country's most notorious paramilitaries, the army-backed AUC, released a statement declaring war on the union leaders, promising to "finish them all off" if they don't leave the country in three months. Paramilitaries, acting with at least tacit approval of Colombian Coca-Cola officials, are suspected in the murder of seven Coca-Cola unionists in recent years and the kidnapping and torture of others. About 3,600 Colombian union members have been killed in the last two decades, at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries and security forces.

In December 2003, paramilitaries arrived at the home of Sinaltrainal union leader Rafael Carvajal in Cúcuta and threatened that they would assassinate his family if he did not stop his complaints against the soft drink giant, who had unjustly suspended him from his work contract several times.

Peruvian doctors on strike

Fifteen thousand public health doctors in Peru went on strike April 12, demanding a budget increase for the public health system, higher wages and an increase in hiring. According to the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP), doctors have not had a wage increase in 14 years. Many hospitals have been unable to update their equipment in 25 years. It is common for patients' relatives to have to bring in food and blankets.

The strikers are demanding the Health Ministry's budget be raised from US$580,000 per year to US$170 million in order to improve infrastructure, wages and equipment.

Stevedores strike continues in Chile

Three hundred Chilean dockworkers and 53 clerks in the port of Arica are still on strike over the severance packages they will receive as a result of the privatization of the port. Other Chilean ports may shut down in solidarity with the strikers. The strike began on April 12 and on April 20 municipal authorities advertised for replacement workers, with no success.

The port of Arica will be privatized at the end of this year. Six hundred jobs will be eliminated. Arica is the latest in a series of port privatizations that have taken place during the administration of President Ricardo Lagos. Dockworkers unions have accepted the privatizations and the loss of jobs while negotiating severance packages.

The union and government have agreed on pensions for sacked workers, but have yet to agree on financial grants for workers that wish to establish small businesses.

Santiago transit workers on hunger strike

Seven workers at Redbus transit in Santiago, Chile, went on a hunger strike April 13. Two hundred of the 600 bus operators at the firm have been on strike since April 3. Redbus runs shuttle buses between Metro stations in Santiago.

Seven drivers decided to go on a hunger strike to protest the lack of resolution in the dispute and to draw the attention of the public to their struggle.

The strike resulted from management plans to rationalize transport by paying bus operators an hourly rate, instead of basing their pay on the number of bus tickets sold. The workers are demanding that their average wage be raised to 320,000 pesos (US$520), up from the current 250,000. They also want the elimination of a productivity bonus for drivers who sell more than 300 fares per shift.

Steel workers strike in Venezuela

Workers at Venezuela's biggest steel plant went on strike April 22 over workers' demands for greater profit sharing and the destruction of 200 jobs. Six thousand workers are on strike against Siderurgica del Orinoco CA (SIDOR).

SIDOR is owned by the Amazonia consortium of transnational corporations, which includes Hylsamex (Mexido), Siderar (Argentina), Sirvensa (Venezuela) and Usiminas (Brazil).

SIDOR management claims that it owes workers nothing out of its profits. A SIDOR press release accused the workers of engaging in an illegal strike.

Oil workers strike in Colombia

Thirty-five hundred workers at the Barrancabermeja and Cartagena refineries struck April 22 over the privatization of Ecopetrol, the country's national oil company.

The government of President Alvaro Uribe immediately declared the strike illegal on the grounds that oil production constitutes an essential public service. He threatened to fire those that did not return to work and to dissolve the oil workers' union, Unión Sindical Obrera (USO). Both refineries have been placed under military command. Army General Carlos Alberto Ospina declared that the army has "permanent control over the entire oil industry." USO leaders defied the return-to-work order.

Ecopetrol provoked the strike by locking out 1,600 workers from both refineries, claiming that some of the Barranca plant's equipment had been sabotaged. Management claims that the strike will have no effect, since there is a 20-day stockpile of gasoline and refined products. Management personnel are operating the plants.

The USO workers reject oil contracts between Ecopetrol and foreign transnational firms that give the latter a greater share of profits than they previously earned from joint projects with Ecopetrol. They also reject the split of Ecopetrol into two firms, one in charge of oil exploitation and another in charge of the refineries. Both measures are considered steps toward the eventual privatization of the company.

New Jersey hospital workers launch wildcat walkout

A group of workers at the Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in Parsippany, New Jersey, walked off the job for four hours on the afternoon of April 20 to protest working conditions. Local 2216 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

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(AFSCME) told the media that a morning incident at the hospital's Mountain Meadow cottage complex sparked the walkout, but declined to reveal the exact nature of the event that led 31 workers to leave their workstations.

Management declared a staffing emergency and began to draw workers from other parts of the hospital's departments to fill the void left by the walkout. According to the union there have been tensions between workers and management over vacations and the hospital's refusal to hire additional staff.

"We've had some disputes with the management," union president Anna Sutton told the *Daily Record*. "Today was the day we couldn't take it any more." Local 2216 represents some 600 nurses, human service workers and food service workers at the hospital. One day before the Parsippany work stoppage, 280 nurses at Lourdes Medical Center in Burlington County, New Jersey, walked out when management attempted to implement work rules without consulting the union.

Philadelphia Coca-Cola workers strike

Some 450 workers at the Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Company went on strike April 10 after voting by a three-to-one margin against the company's final contract offer. Members of Teamsters Local 830 said the company's offer on wages was inadequate.

A company spokesperson said the strike came as a surprise. But Local 830 President Joe Brock told the Associated Press, "The atmosphere in the plant is very dictatorial." He said workers often are verbally abused and injured workers have been forced to hire attorneys to collect workmen's compensation benefits.

New York Access-a-Ride drivers on strike

In a dispute over wages and benefits, about 1,000 drivers went on strike Thursday, April 22, against four companies that provide van service for disabled riders in New York City's Transit's Access-A-Ride program. There are total of eight companies in New York that provide this service for an estimated 8,000 disabled and elderly people, about half of whom ride the four struck companies.

Negotiations for a new settlement between Local 1181 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents the workers, and the four companies—Maggie's Paratransit, Atlantic Paratransit, Transit Facility Management and MV Transportation—have been ongoing since September of last year when their old six-year contract expired.

The New York Transit Authority (TA) has said that it will service the affected riders by using livery cabs and vans from a paratransit firm whose workers are represented by another union that is not on strike. However, there have been reports that the TA is having some difficulty in accomplishing this.

A union spokesperson has said that the most contentious issues involve their members' demand for a guaranteed 40-hour workweek and company contributions to their health and other benefits. A representative for the companies has threatened to replace the strikers with scab labor, but many riders are expressing support for the striking drivers. Negotiations were scheduled to begin April 26 with a federal labor mediator.

UAW workers vote on Caterpillar pact

United Auto Workers members will vote on a new labor contract with Caterpillar Monday, April 26, on the first agreement since the heavy equipment maker won major concessions after defeating a strike by the union six years ago. The deal would cover about 8,000 UAW workers and 23,000 retirees and surviving spouses at plants in Illinois, Colorado, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

No details have been released about the proposed pact, which no doubt is so poor that UAW officials have not even recommended its passage. "We want to remain neutral and leave it up to the membership to decide," said Sam Lee, a member of the union's bargaining committee and president of UAW Local 2096 in Pontiac, Illinois.

The UAW bureaucracy betrayed a series of strikes during the 1980s and 1990s by Caterpillar workers, including in April 1992 when it order 12,000 strikers to return to work after management threatened to employ strikebreakers. Cost reductions, productivity gains, wider use of part-time help and a shift in manufacturing operations to low-wage countries have since reduced the UAW's ranks at Caterpillar by about 4,000 workers since the last contract. Caterpillar just announced that it has tripled its first-quarter profits.

Brief strike at UAW-GM Center

Clerical, janitorial and information technology workers at the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources in Detroit launched a brief strike at noon on April 23. The action was called off within minutes when negotiators for the center agreed to finalize economic issues on the contract covering 115 members of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) No. 459.

The contract has yet to be finalized, but OPEIU President Lance Rhines said management agreed to a 50 percent match of worker contributions to 401(k) plans up to a particular level and will restore jobs to the bargaining unit that were previously outsourced or transformed into temporary positions. The union is still negotiating over whether certain jobs will fall under the contract or exist as nonunion labor.

The OPEIU contract expired on March 31. The UAW-GM Center is a nonprofit organization jointly managed by General Motors and the UAW bureaucracy.

***Wall Street Journal* employees protest at annual meeting**

Reporters and editors from the *Wall Street Journal* set up a picket outside the newspaper's annual meeting April 21 to call attention to their demands for better wages and health care benefits. *Journal* workers have been working without a contract for one year while its union, the Independent Association of Publishers' Employees, has been engaged in talks with the paper's owner, Dow Jones.

Workers have suffered a series of cutbacks over the years and last fall union members removed their president and bargaining committee members after rejecting a tentative agreement.

Telecommunications workers strike Aliant

Forty-three hundred workers at Aliant, Atlantic Canada's largest telecommunications company, walked off the job April 23. The main issues in the strike are job security, pensions, benefits and wages. Ninety-three percent of the workers voted against the company's most recent offer.

For two years the workers have been negotiating a single contract to replace nine separate collective agreements dating from before a series of telecommunications mergers led to the formation of Aliant. The workers are represented by the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and the Atlantic Communication and Technical Workers Union (ACTWU).

BC health care workers closer to striking

The unions representing 43,000 hospital and long-term care workers in British Columbia have applied for essential service levels to be set by the Labour Board—the prerequisite to the issuing of a 72-hour strike notice. The Health Employers Association of BC, behind which stands the Campbell Liberals, is refusing to drop its demands for $900 million in wage and benefit rollbacks. At the same time, more than 2,500 workers have received layoff notices since the beginning of 2004.

The workers, who voted 89 percent in favor of strike action, are represented by numerous unions, including the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU), the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), among others.

Striking Windsor casino workers rally

Workers at Casino Windsor, on strike since April 3 at the gambling facility across the border from Detroit, rallied Sunday to press their demands for a contract and improved wages and benefits. Three thousand

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workers, including union members representing French and English teachers, University of Windsor faculty, public sector and Canadian Auto Workers locals from Ontario communities of Windsor, Chatham and Tilbury, participated.

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