

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 March 2004

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Teachers strike in Santa Fe, Argentina

Teachers in the province of Santa Fe, Argentina, will begin a 72-hour strike this week as part of the campaign for higher wages and for rolling past bonuses into the wage scale, which would increase retirement income. The base wage is 210 pesos, though teachers are getting about 650 pesos a month. The teachers are demanding that the base wage be increased to 460 pesos.

Gustavo Terés, secretary of the Rosario Local of the Santa Fe Teachers' Union (AMASFE), accused the government of gangster tactics, in response to threats from the office of Governor Romero to fire striking teachers. Terés emphasized that only during times of dictatorships have teachers ever been fired. He accused authorities of pursuing a strategy to wear out the teachers and predicted that such a move would fail. The union has also ignored a government order of compulsory arbitration.

Since classes began on March 1, AMASFE members have spent nine days on strike, on and off.

Brazil: Petrobras construction workers on strike

Oil workers at the Pem Setal dock, employed in the building of an oil platform in the city of Itaguaí, will begin a strike this Monday for an indefinite period of time. The workers are demanding a 50 percent wage increase, which would place Pem Setal workers at the same level as the average for all dockworkers in the region. They are working on the first semi-submersible oil platform to be completely built in Brazil.

Tens of thousands in Ecuador demand President Gutierrez's resignation

On March 15, in Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city, more than 45,000 marched to demand the resignation of President Lucio Gutierrez. The demonstrators oppose Gutierrez's laissez-faire economic policy and his support for the policies of the Bush administration in Latin America and in Iraq.

On December 8, 2004, the Gutierrez regime replaced all the Supreme Court justices with supporters of the right-wing Ecuadorian Roldocist Party (PRE), whose leader Abdalá

Bucaram is in exile in Panama, assuring that corruption and other charges against Bucaram and others will not proceed.

In addition, Gutierrez is associated with increasing repression against opposition members, including elected officials belonging to the Socialist Party and to the Democratic Left Party (Izquierda Democrática, ID).

A strike by court employees demanding the resignation of Gutierrez's Supreme Court ended last week. A general strike has been scheduled for April 16.

Striking tire workers demonstrate in Texarkana

More than a thousand strikers and supporters demonstrated in Texarkana, as the strike by 1,600 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 752L comes to the end of the first week. The Ohio-based tire maker Cooper is demanding changes in wage structures and an increase in workers' portion of health care costs.

Cooper wants to keep newly hired workers at 75 percent of top pay scale until the sixth year of the contract. Previously, new hires rose to top pay after only two years. The company wants to implement a new procedure for job bidding under which seniority rights for a position opening resulting from a worker vacating his job will be abolished.

The union is also seeking to divert part of the cost-of-living adjustment toward increases in health care premiums, something the company has refused to go along with. The company's proposal seeks as well to require workers to pay higher deductibles and additional co-payments.

New Jersey electrical workers' strike ends

After 98 days on the picket line, more than 1,300 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) in five different locals in New Jersey representing lineman, technicians, mechanics, and customer service representatives returned to work on Wednesday, March 16. This ended the longest strike against Jersey Central Power and & Light (JCP&L), the state's second-largest utility providing electricity to more than 1 million customers. JCP&L has been a subsidiary of Ohio's First Energy for the past three years.

Governor Codey had made it abundantly clear that he wanted the walkout that started December 8 to finally come to an end. As a result, the tentative agreement was reached on March 12, when both the union and management were

engaged in a marathon 14-hour negotiation session under the direction of State Labor and Workforce Development Commissioner Thomas D. Carver.

A union spokesman would not reveal how many strikers voted to either accept or reject the final settlement. This is not surprising, given that many workers have expressed extreme bitterness to the press about the details of the new contract.

For example, although the workers will receive a 12 percent wage increase over the four-year life of the settlement, many workers have expressed their discontent that this will be more than made up by the cutbacks they will suffer in health benefits. Under the terms of the new contract, workers will now have to pay \$100 a month for family health benefits instead of \$25 a month.

Nancy Startare, a meter reader, told the *Star-Ledger* that the \$1.14-per-hour increase in her wages would be more than offset by the \$ 1.54-per-hour increase in health benefit contributions. She concluded: "This fight was for nothing. It's not any better."

Furthermore, the company has obtained its major demand for the establishment of work rules that will give it greater flexibility in forcing its employees to be available for emergencies. The new contract calls for some workers to be on a four-day 10-hour workweek and a rotational system where a designated number of workers must be available for emergency calls.

Workers strike West Virginia nursing home over benefits and staffing issues

Talks between Heritage Manor Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Huntington, West Virginia, and more than 100 striking nurses, dietary workers and housekeepers broke off March 18 without an agreement. Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 struck four days earlier on March 14 after rejecting a proposal from Genesis Healthcare Corp., the nursing home's owner, that proposed changes in health care and longer hours for less pay.

According to Genesis, premiums for the union's health care plan went up 56 percent in December, and the company is seeking to substitute a cheaper plan. The SEIU claims the company has not provided it with complete details of the new insurance program. Workers also want to increase their hours from the current two-week maximum of 75 to 80 in order to overcome staffing problems, with no diminution in pay.

Genesis has brought some 70 to 80 replacement workers from its 23 nursing homes in West Virginia and surrounding states. No new contract negotiations have been scheduled.

Strike over outsourcing in second week at Buffalo equipment manufacturer

Seventy members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 936 are continuing their strike over outsourcing against Eastman Machine Co. in Buffalo, New York. Mediated talks broke down March 11, and workers manned picket lines a short time later, charging the company has established a joint venture in China and already cut 20 jobs.

The workers manufacture machines that are used to cut cloth for the apparel industry. The company is currently using its 50 salaried employees to perform union work.

New Brunswick teachers vote to strike

On March 15, about 7,600 members of New Brunswick Teachers Federation voted to strike by an overwhelming margin of 98 percent. The main issue for the teachers is workload: according to union president Brian Bawn, "Stress on the classroom teacher today has increased drastically compared with seven or eight years ago. There is more paperwork, larger classes, more meetings, and more work with special needs students." The teachers' contract expired last year, and negotiations with the province broke down on February 8.

Manitoba school staff reject employer's offer

The school support workers of Park West School Division in the western part of the province of Manitoba rejected the employer's last wage and benefit offer on March 18.

The workers, who provide classroom assistance to teachers, clean and maintain schools, and drive, are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3037. The union has pointed out that the last offer, which gave it a 2 percent increase in the first year, does not provide parity with other division employees. Teachers at the same board accepted a new contract recently and reached parity for teachers from the two old divisions that merged into one new division in 2002. Both parties will go back into conciliation on April 19.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact