

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 August 2005

Latin America

Argentine strike wave continues

Tens of thousands of workers across Argentina participated in strikes and protests over the past week. Those participating in the actions included railroad workers, textile workers and health care workers, along with government employees and teachers. Job actions included the following:

** Railroad workers:* On August 4, a strike by railroad conductors over wages paralyzed passenger and cargo service on Argentina's national rail network. Rail service to the Argentine ports was disrupted along with passenger service. Hugo Camino, press secretary for the Fraternity (the union that led the 24-hour walkout), declared that other walkouts would follow if the workers' demands are not addressed.

While officially not on strike, the Railroad Workers Union, which organizes other rail workers, instructed its members not to cross Fraternity's picket lines. The rail employees rejected an offer for a starting wage of 1,500 pesos a month (about US\$500) and are asking for 1,850 pesos.

** Hospital workers:* Members of the State Workers' Association (ATE) carried out selective strikes in hospitals across the nation, including a 72-hour walkout at the Garrahan Pediatric Hospital, one of the most prestigious in Latin America. Government authorities have denounced the local union leaders at Garrahan as "terrorists" and threatened nurses with prosecution for "abandoning" their young patients. The public health workers are demanding a minimum monthly wage of 1,800 pesos.

At the Posadas Hospital, also in Buenos Aires, workers walked out on Thursday. The Association of Professionals demanded a minimum of 2,000 pesos; hospital authorities have offered 1,200 pesos. Posadas employees are also demanding that 400 temporary workers be made permanent. At the Mabrán Institute, assembled workers voted to continue a strategy of weekly protests and strikes that they began two months ago.

** Teachers:* In the northwestern province of Salta, public school teachers walked out last week. Hundreds of teachers marched and rallied in the cities of Salta and Orán, supported by parents and other workers. The teachers reject the current informal system of bonuses that do not count toward retirement. They are demanding that base pay be raised to 750 pesos a month instead. In March, Salta teachers struck for 47 days.

At the extreme south, in Tierra del Fuego, public school teachers have set up protest tents of "docent dignity" in the cities of Río Grande and Ushuaia to press for wage increases. In Ushuaia last week, protesting teachers clashed with the city's police and refused to end their protest.

** Government employees:* In the city of Corrientes, near the Paraguayan border, thousands of government workers marched and protested on Saturday, rejecting a wage increase announced by provincial authorities two weeks ago, subject to a renegotiation of provincial debt. On August 5, the government declared that the raise would no longer be subject to the renegotiation, a move directed at preempting the march. Union leaders indicated there is widespread dissatisfaction among the ranks over the wage increase issue. Corrientes's teachers also struck for 24 hours last Friday, demanding a monthly raise of 130 pesos.

** Textile:* Protests also continued at Acetatos Argentinos in Buenos Aires. Workers are demanding higher wages and a healthier working

environment, and that workers employed by outside contractors be recognized as union members. The workers have carried out a slowdown on and off during the last three months. The Textile Workers Union (ATO) reported that similar grievances exist at textile plants across the country.

Puerto Rican workers protest governor's wage-busting policies

On August 5, hundreds of Puerto Rican trade unionists and their supporters marched in San Juan against the policies of Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá. Acevedo has unilaterally abrogated contracts for public employees, cut the workweek to four days and imposed a 15 percent wage cut. The Acevedo administration insists that it will defend employee benefits but is demanding that workers accept individual cuts in wages and hours, rather than submit to mass layoffs.

Puerto Rico is under pressure from Wall Street to reduce its fiscal debt. Moody's and Standard & Poor's have downgraded Puerto Rico's bonds to speculative levels once this year. Last week, Moody's representatives met with Acevedo and pressed him to carry out severe budget cuts to stave off another reduction in bond ratings.

AFL-CIO unions agreed with Acevedo to urge their workers to voluntarily accept the cuts. The Puerto Rican Federations, on the other hand, have rejected the governor's plan. Puerto Rico employs 200,000 government workers.

Mexican copper workers threaten to strike in solidarity with Arizona miners

Copper workers employed by the Grupo Mexico transnational announced on Friday that they may extend a planned one-day strike in support of the strike of Asarco copper miners in southern Arizona. The strike, affecting the mines of Cananea, Nacozari and Aguas Prietas, is scheduled to take place on August 12, coinciding with negotiations between Asarco and unions representing 1,500 copper workers.

About 750 workers at the Ray Mine at Kearny and at Asarco's concentrator at nearby Hayden walked off the job a day after their contract expired June 30. Within a day or two, another 750 workers who had been without a contract for a year, joined them on strike at the Hayden Smelter, at the Mission Mine in Sahuarita, at the Silver Bell Mine in Marana, Arizona and at the Amarillo Refinery in Amarillo, Texas. Management is demanding a wage freeze and an increase in the workers' share of health insurance premiums.

On July 27, Asarco sent the workers a letter informing them that it was in a precarious financial situation and urging them to return to work immediately. So far, 82 workers have returned.

Mexican copper union leader René Córdoba declared that the 4,000 copper workers on the Mexican side of the border would continue their walkout beyond August 12, barring a resolution to the conflict. Grupo Mexico may be postponing negotiations at the Asarco mines while it looks for a buyer for Asarco.

Mexican steel strike

Steel workers at the Lázaro Cárdenas mill in Michoacán, Mexico, went on strike August 2 following an impasse in negotiations. Picket lines went up following a statement by the finance and administration director of Grupo Villacero, which owns the mill, chiding the union for its "intransigence."

The National Mining and Metalworkers union (SNTMMS) charged management with multiple violations of the current collective bargaining agreement. As a precondition for restarting negotiations, it is demanding an agreement on safety measures in buses that transport workers, training and advancement opportunities for its members, and the rehiring of seven fired employees.

United States

Northwest executives cash in stocks while financing strikebreaking measures

Northwest Airline executives have been dumping their stock as the carrier heads towards a confrontation with its mechanics that could lead it to declare bankruptcy. Former co-chairman Al Checchi unloaded 86 percent of his stock—some 4 million shares worth \$26 million. Chairman of the Board Gary Wilson has shed 70 percent of his stock—3 million shares valued at \$26 million. And current CEO Doug Steenland, who sailed last week that Northwest's "overall total labor costs are too high," cashed in 97,000 shares worth \$486,295.

When talks between the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) and the airline broke down last week, stock prices tumbled 8.6 percent. Northwest is demanding \$176 million per year in cuts: a 25 to 26 percent pay cut; a reduction in mechanics' jobs by 2,000; an increase over the current 38 percent of maintenance work that can be outsourced to outside contractors; and a freeze on the traditional pension plan and its replacement with a 401(k) plan.

Meanwhile, a board of directors' report leaked to the press last week reveals that Northwest plans to spend \$107 million to prepare for the pending August 20 strike by mechanics—some three times the amount the airline wants in concessions over the next two years. The figure includes the hiring and training of replacement workers.

Northwest also sought to utilize bureaucratic infighting between AMFA and the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents baggage handlers and customer service agents. IAM District 143 president Bobby De Pace posted a web site message for his members claiming he had learned from company negotiators that AMFA proposed the airline seek increased wage cuts from the IAM. Should the mechanics strike, Northwest hopes to tap the IAM to perform struck work normally done by mechanics.

Lockout at Connecticut nursing home

Management for Harborside Healthcare locked out 260 workers July 31 at Connecticut's second-largest nursing home facility. Members of the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, voted two days earlier to reject a contract that came up short on issues such as the cost of health care, pensions and tuition reimbursement at the Arden House nursing home in Hamden.

But instead of striking, the union indicated it would be willing to resume negotiations, leading Harborside Healthcare to impose a lockout. "This is clearly an attempt to bully and frighten people into accepting an unacceptable contract," said 1199 spokeswoman Debra Chernoff.

Los Angeles transit driver strike over threatened pay cuts

About three dozen bus drivers in the San Fernando Valley walked out on strike August 1 to protest pay cuts imposed by a private contractor for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA). The striking workers operate four of the MTA's 200 bus lines that were awarded under a \$36.3 million five-year contract to Transportation Concepts, Inc.

Teamsters Local 484, which represents the striking drivers, said Transportation Concepts is demanding pay cuts that could result in drivers' pay dropping from \$14 to \$10 an hour. The company also wants to cut sick leave and vacation time.

Rhode Island nurses protest mandatory overtime

Two dozen nurses picketed outside Women & Infants Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, August 4 to protest increased work hours that add stress to their jobs and jeopardize patient care. Hospital management

has resorted to extensive use of mandatory overtime to force nurses to work double shifts.

The NICU, which employs 160 nurses that care for sick and prematurely born infants, has traditionally been the unit most affected by mandatory overtime. "Pretty much every time we work, we get mandated," a member of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 told the *Providence Journal*. But the practice has spread to other units as well. In the postpartum unit, where 110 nurses work, mandatory shifts are being imposed an average of three or four times a week.

Michigan lockout enters fourth month

Workers at the Hercules Drawn Steel plant in Livonia, Michigan, are entering their fourth month on the picket line. Management locked out members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 174 after contract talks broke down.

"They totally want to gut the entire collective bargaining agreement," Local 174 President Doug Grima told the *Livonia Observer*. Management wants to eliminate seniority rights and the disciplinary procedure, paving the way for selective firing of workers, with no right to a review process.

Taking advantage of a new labor law, Hercules has locked out only 52 of the 72 union members. Company owners also have plants in Taylor and Oak Park.

Canada

British Columbia loggers set up picket lines

More than 100 logging truckers set up picket lines at Canfor and West Fraser Timber mills in Houston and Burns Lake in northern BC on August 3. They are demanding a wage raise and job security. The truckers' pay rates have not kept up with increasing fuel prices and maintenance costs. According to a representative of their union, the United Steelworkers, "Some are actually going in the hole. We've had guys that are redeeming their RRSPs to continue to keep operating."

Last February, loggers in Prince George received a rate increase of 12 percent after a two-week strike.

Newfoundland oil platform workers reject contract offer

About 450 oil platform workers with Hibernia, off the coast of Newfoundland, about 300 kilometers from St. John's, rejected a first contract offer on August 4 by an overwhelming majority of 90 percent. The union representing them, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), has been in the negotiations of a first contract since October 2001. Neither the union nor the company has revealed what the issues are, but a union spokesman has confirmed that money is one of them.

The Hibernia platform went in operation in 1997 and is jointly owned by ExxonMobil Canada, Chevron Canada Resources, Petro-Canada, Canada Hibernia Holding Corp., Murphy Oil and Norsk Hydro.



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