

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 October 2006

Uruguayan construction workers demand parity with foreign counterparts

Construction workers involved in the building of a cellulose plant in Fray Bentos, Uruguay for the Botnia Company went on strike September 18 demanding that their wages be raised to the same level as the company's foreign employees (Botnia is based in Finland). On September 28 the 3,400 strikers decided to continue the strike.

The union representing the workers opposes a company plan to employ 1,000 European workers in the installation of plant equipment. "Domestic employees should have priority," declared construction union President Pedro Porley. "We need training courses so that our members can make the transition from construction to assembly."

Fray Bentos is on the Uruguay River, which forms the border between Uruguay and Argentina. The future cellulose plant is controversial. Across the border, thousands of protesters have demonstrated against the project since its expected pollution would create environmental problems, harming the region's tourist and fishing industries.

Surprise strike by airline workers in Buenos Aires

On September 26, ground personnel for LAN airlines initiated a surprise strike in Buenos Aires' Jorge Newberry Airport. The workers demanded that management stop the persecution of union delegates, rehire laid-off workers and grant a wage increase. Carlos Platkowski, leader of the Association of Airline Ground Personnel, said that the union has negotiated with LAN management for over nine months and that the 460 LAN workers at Newberry have not had a raise in three years.

The job action prompted Argentina's labor ministry to intervene by imposing a two-week mandatory conciliation period. Under Argentine law, the ministry has the ability to prohibit strikes for two weeks while negotiations take place under government tutelage.

Chilean owned LAN represents 15 percent of the nation's domestic flights.

Twenty-six-day strike in Chilean public hospitals

Workers returned to work at Chilean public health hospitals and clinics on Sunday after a 26-day strike. However, the workers' demands of higher wages, more money for the health system and a restructuring of public health in Chile have yet to be addressed.

Leaders of the National Confederation of Health Workers

(CONFENATS) insist that the strike has only been "suspended" in the wake of an agreement between CONFENATS and a Senate committee that promised to act as the "workers' representative" in negotiations with public health authorities.

Chilean President Michelle Bachelet has declared that the government cannot increase resources for the health sector beyond what already has been agreed to. Chile's system of public health hospitals and clinics are the only source of medical care for the 80 percent of Chile's citizens who are uninsured and too poor to afford private health services.

On September 26 marches by health workers and their supporters took place in Santiago and other cities. Seven thousand marched in Santiago and 3,000 marched in Valparaiso. Both of these protests included many high school students and teachers in addition to the health workers.

Ultimatum to Bolivian textile workers: accept wage cut or face plant closure

Seven hundred textile workers at the "Bellavista Oveja Tome" textile plant in Tome, Bolivia, have been told to either accept a wage cut or face the closure of their plant. Bellavista specializes in wool textiles; an important part of the plant's output is exported to the US, Canada, Australia and other countries.

Bellavista Vice President Berczely Ator appealed to the workers to give up part of the wage gains they have made since 2002, claiming that the wage cut proposal is only a temporary "belt-tightening." He also claimed that Bellavista wages have grown by 34 percent since 2002, more than in any other industry in Bolivia.

Virginia DuPont workers test positive for controversial chemical

Workers at a DuPont Company plant in Chesterfield County, Virginia have tested positive for the chemical PFOA, which is believed to be carcinogenic. The tests were performed on 89 workers at the company's plant near Richmond, but because the tests were confidential no details have been made public.

PFOA, or perfluorooctanoic acid, is used in the manufacture of Teflon products. The man-made chemical has been found to cause liver, development and reproductive problems in laboratory animals and an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) science advisory board recommended the product be considered a "likely carcinogen."

Dupont maintains there are no "known" health effects

associated with PFOA and it “does not pose a health risk to the general public.” However, last year DuPont paid a \$16.5 million penalty to the EPA for withholding information about the potential health and environmental risks posed by the chemical after workers at its Parkersburg, West Virginia plant tested positive. The company also agreed to pay \$107 million to settle a lawsuit filed by residents near the Parkersburg plant after traces were found in groundwater.

DuPont hired an independent laboratory to conduct tests on workers at the Parkersburg plant. The company claims those tests, while indicating positive results for exposure, show no association between PFOA and health issues. However, PFOA was never manufactured at that plant and only small amounts were used on the Teflon production line there during the 1953 to 2004 period.

Talks break off after striking Hawaii nurses reject tentative agreement

Negotiators for Wilcox Memorial Hospital in Kauai, Hawaii walked out of talks September 26 after the union representing 120 striking nurses informed management that workers had rejected the hospitals “last, best and final” offer. Hospital management responded by threatening to declare negotiations at an impasse.

The contract talks have foundered on staff-to-patient ratios. In July, nurses unanimously rejected a provocative tentative agreement that included a provision to terminate positions for 12 striking licensed practical nurses as well as tearing up portions of the proposal that had been previously agreed upon.

The Hawaii Nurses Association, which represents striking hospital workers, said union members had “overwhelmingly” rejected the latest proposal, but declined to reveal vote totals. A hospital spokesperson declared, “We hope that those nurses who voted for the hospital’s offer will cross the picket line and come back to work.”

Kansas aerospace workers reject contract, vote to strike

Machinists at the Canadian-owned Bombardier Aerospace plant in Wichita, Kansas are slated to strike October 2 after rejecting a company proposal and voting by an 80 percent margin to launch a work stoppage. Bombardier’s final three-year offer included wage increases of 4 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the subsequent two years. The current health plan has been retained, but workers will be required to pay increased premiums that the union says will wipe out pay increases.

Members of the International Association of Machinists Local 639 have gone without a raise for four years. Bombardier maintains a production line for the Learjet 60 in Wichita, along with a flight test center and service center.

Two Sago miners commit suicide

The Associated Press reported that two miners at the Sago Mine in West Virginia committed suicide over that past month. John Nelson Boni, who maintained water pumps at the mine, shot himself September 23 at his home. William Lee Chisolm,

the dispatcher responsible for monitoring carbon monoxide alarms and alerting miners, also shot himself at home on August 29.

Both men were interviewed about the January 2 Sago Mine disaster that resulted in the deaths of 12 miners. Boni told investigators that he had detected low levels of methane in the mine five days before the explosion that fatally trapped the miners.

Chisolm testified that a carbon monoxide alarm sounded 20 minutes before the explosion. Following company procedures, he alerted crews and asked to verify the alarm, because the system had a record of malfunctions.

Last month, sole survivor Randal McCloy and the families of two miners killed in the disaster filed suit in a West Virginia court. The suit charges IHG (International Coal Group) with negligence in “failing to put in place any standardized operating and safety policies and procedures” and failure to “monitor” the safety practices and compliance with federal mine safety laws.

Toronto regional transit workers set to strike

At a strike vote held on September 21, about 300 drivers, mechanics and cleaning staff at Durham Transit, east of Toronto, voted 92 percent to walk out on October 5 if no deal is reached in negotiations scheduled to conclude October 3 and 4. The work stoppage will begin at 6 p.m. in order to allow people to get home from work at rush hour.

The chairman of the union that represents the workers, the transit section of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 222, says it rejects concession demands, including a reduction in benefits for all employees, including retirees; taking away the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA); canceling paid education; removing contracting-out language and implementing more part-time jobs.

Twenty thousand to 30,000 people use the Durham Region transit service every day.



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