Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 February 2007

Latin America

Chile: Pronto Copec strike and occupation in third week

On February 18, workers at the Pronto Copec convenient store chain issued a press communiqué calling on all workers to rally in Santiago's Constitution Square and oppose repression against the strikers, mostly women forced to work for substandard wages.

The communiqué indicates that from day one of the strike, government security forces systematically engaged in a campaign of provocations to force the workers to end their occupation and return to work.

Mexican government declares education strike "nonexistent"

On February 16, the government of Fernando Calderón declared "nonexistent" (i.e., banned) a strike by education workers employed by the National College for Professional and Technical Education (CONALEP) in Sinaloa State, Mexico. The workers had been on strike for one week.

The 430 strikers are demanding a 51 percent wage increase plus better working conditions. Management's latest offer is 3.95 percent. The union that represents the educators announced it would appeal the government order. Pending the results of the appeal, the union ordered its members back to work.

The technical college has 6,500 students at 12 campuses.

Further south, in Michoacán State, professors walked off their jobs last Monday at the San Nicolás Hidalgo University, after rejecting a wage offer of 3.8 percent from university administrators. The educators are demanding a 15 percent raise.

Costa Rican public health workers fight pay cut

The union that represents employees at the Costa Rican Social Security Fund confirmed last week that it will launch a strike this week against a 15 percent wage cut. Seven thousand nurses' aids employed by the Fund will have their monthly pay package cut by $60 to $135, depending on the tasks the employees carry out.

Since 1991, the nurses' aids benefited from a wage boost designed as partial compensation in lieu of a formal wage increase. The benefit has now been cancelled.

São Paulo transit strike

Drivers and employees of Viacao Himalaia, the urban bus company that operates in sprawling eastern São Paulo, walked off their jobs last Friday, paralyzing the company's 559 diesel buses and electric trolley buses that serve 35 routes in this industrial city. Though the company has an agreement with another private bus operator, São Paulo Transportes, to help break the strike, the latter company's 240 buses have not provided enough capacity to serve Viacao Himalaia's 260,000 daily passengers. As a result, long queues have formed throughout the day at bus stops.

According to the afternoon daily, *O Estado de SãoPaulo*, the reason for the strike was not announced by the drivers' union, but it is suspected the action was called to force the transit company to pay workers' back wages.

At Argentine hospital, health workers renew their strike

Workers and resident doctors at the Clínicas Hospital in Buenos Aires went on strike last Thursday, demanding an "urgent budget increase" for the hospital. The strike is a continuation of a walkout that took place in November 2006. That job action was supposedly settled when the government allocated 7 million pesos and created a "crisis commission" to look into the hospital's problems while a new budget was negotiated with the health workers.

Those negotiations failed. The hospital staff rejected a 183 million peso ($60 million) draft budget.

The strikers are demanding a budget of twice that size, which they consider the minimum for the hospital to operate well. Union spokespersons indicated that the hospital ran out of many critical supplies three weeks ago.

Last week, at rallies in downtown Buenos Aires, the strikers insisted on the urgency of their demands. The strike has been declared of indefinite duration.

United States

Union-busting at struck Arkansas plant

Strikebreakers began crossing picket lines February 14 at the Kohler plant in Searcy, Arkansas, as the strike by 220 members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1000 entered its third month.

Union members voted down a company offer on December 9 in which Kohler demanded the right to subcontract work and use vacation days for time taken under the Family Medical Leave Act, short-term disability, or workmen's compensation claims. Wages and benefits are also in dispute. The UAW made an offer to return to work under the old agreement, but Kohler has refused. The company manufactures stainless steel products.

Workers terminated in Tennessee strike

Maremont Corp. sent out termination letters on February 16

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to 88 striking workers at its Loudon, Tennessee, exhaust products manufacturing facility. The previous day, company negotiators broke off federally mediated talks with International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 2524 after declaring they had reached an impasse.

Workers went on strike against Maremont on February 4 after rejecting a contract offer that contained no pay increase, substituted an inferior 401(k) benefit plan for a pension plan, and demanded workers shoulder an increased portion of health care costs. The strike has been punctuated by clashes between strikebreakers, backed by security guards, and striking workers. A security guard hit one striker with a car.

On February 14, the plant was evacuated after an alleged bomb threat. The Loudon Police Department has set up a checkpoint on Maremont Parkway near the plant.

In a February 7 press release, Maremont justified its lowering of Loudon workers' living standards, claiming it manufactures 95 percent of its products in the United States. The company cynically declared, "It is not easy competing with offshore companies who are not required to provide their employees workers compensation, health care or retirement benefits and only pay less than $2.00 per hour.... We value all of our Loudon Employees and welcome them to return to work."

Apple CEO attacks teachers

Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Inc., told an education reform conference that improvement in schools was possible only if principals could fire teachers. "What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them that when they came in they couldn't get rid of people that they thought weren't any good? I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way. This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy," said Jobs to the conference in Austin, Texas.

An important segment of Apple's business is bound up with government contracts that provide computer hardware to public schools. Jobs is currently under investigation by the federal government on charges that he was involved in backdating stock options at Apple and at a previous post as chief executive at Disney-owned Pixar.

US government to investigate Texas oil refinery explosion

Officials from the US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board were dispatched February 17 to Sunray, Texas, just one day after an explosion rocked a refinery owned by the Valero Energy Corporation and injured 19 workers. Three of the workers were transferred to a burn unit at University Medical Center in Lubbock, Texas. Firefighters worked through the night to extinguish the blaze, which could be seen from as far as 60 miles away.

The probe could be extended to three other fires that occurred at Valero refineries in Texas City, Texas, and Delaware City, Delaware. Valero is the largest refiner of oil in North America, where it has 16 facilities. Six of those are in Texas. An additional facility is located in Aruba.

Canada

Deal reached in actors' strike

The six-week strike by the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) may be at an end following a deal struck last Friday.

No details have yet been published regarding the proposed three-year contract, but it apparently contains wage provisions amounting to an accumulated increase of 10 percent over the life of the contract and resolves the hotly contested issue of compensation for new media.

The actual impact of the strike was limited, since letters of continuation were signed by ACTRA allowing existing productions to continue. The strike was called during what is typically a slow period for film and television production in southern Ontario, which is home to the vast majority of performers affected by the strike.

Teachers strike in Alberta

Five hundred fifty teachers at 22 schools in the Parkland School Division west of Edmonton, Alberta, went on strike last week when talks broke down between their union, the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), and the Parkland school board.

The teachers are seeking improvements in working conditions and increases in pay. The latest offer from the school board includes a 9.5 percent pay increase over three years. The union says wages are not the only issue and that teachers want to be "treated with the dignity we deserve...."

The teachers have been without a contract since last August. They voted to strike in October when no agreement could be reached through mediated talks. Two years ago, the teachers were locked out but were ordered back to work by the provincial Conservative government.

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