

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 March 2007

Latin America

Tens of thousands repudiate US-Costa Rica free trade agreement

On February 26 an estimated 50,000 workers, peasants and students marched and rallied in San José, Costa Rica to protest a draft free-trade treaty with the United States. Smaller demonstrations took place in other cities. In the city of Siquirres, in Limón province, protesters blocked a highway. Six people were arrested in confrontations with the police.

The size of the march surpassed expectations and exceeded previous protests against the treaty. The demonstrators are demanding that President Oscar Arias remove the treaty from consideration by the nation's congress. The Costa Rican unions threatened to launch a national strike if the agreement is not removed.

Academic critics of the proposed agreement indicate that it may exacerbate economic and social inequality in Costa Rica, benefiting the ruling oligarchy and disrupting the lives of agricultural workers. Proponents of the treaty denounced the marchers for "refusing to engage in a debate on the issue." While the opposite is the case, both President Arias and the National Assembly have refused an open debate.

Strike by Brazilian refinery workers

Employees of the sprawling Petrobras refinery near Rio de Janeiro went on strike last Thursday. The issue is a wage increase. The 8,000 strikers are employed by private firms that subcontract work with Petrobras. They provide engineering, maintenance and construction services.

A Petrobras spokesperson claimed that the strikers are demanding wage hikes that range between 50 and 493 percent.

Armored truck drivers walk out in Argentina

Drivers that deliver cash to Argentine banks declared themselves in a strike of unlimited duration last Wednesday, forcing the Central Bank to take emergency measures to provide cash to the nation's banks and automatic tellers. The money is being transported by police vehicles.

The delivery drivers are striking in protest after a security guard was killed during an armed assault on an armored truck in Buenos Aires province. Another guard was seriously wounded in the assault.

Argentina: Airline employees on strike

Maintenance workers employed by LAN Argentina, an international airline that serves the southern cone and that also flies to the US, walked off their jobs last Friday. The Labor Ministry stepped in and imposed binding arbitration on the workers.

Workers are protesting the firing by LAN management of a LAN dispatcher in the Iguazú airport in northeastern Argentina.

Mexican airline stewards reject give-back demands

In response to a company petition to the Labor Ministry, stewards employed by Mexicana de Aviación rejected modifications to their contract. Mexicana executives argued that the proposed contract changes would save the carrier US\$25 million annually. A representative for the stewards rejected the demand, saying that the give-back would nullify all the gains made by the workers in the last contract. Management claims that the current contract discourages investment in the airline.

The airline is demanding the stewards give up their union-controlled hiring hall and make concessions on the right to strike at the end of each contract, seniority rights, overtime provisions, holidays, year-end bonuses and other benefits. Management is also demanding the right to reduce the number of stewards it employs. The airline currently employs 1,400 stewards.

Four hundred stewards rallied at the Labor Ministry on Friday to pressure the ministry not to accede to Mexicana's request.

United States

Mississippi shipyard paralyzed by strike

About 8,000 workers walked out on strike March 8 against the Northrop Grumman Ship Systems Ingalls operations in Pascagoula, Mississippi demanding more pay and opposing hikes in health insurance. Workers voted down the company's most recent offer this week by

an 8-to-1 margin.

Management has indicated it has no plans to reopen negotiations with the Pascagoula Metal Trades Council (PMTC), which represents the various crafts that comprise the Ingalls shipyard's workforce. A leader of pipe fitters' union told the *Sun Herald* that the company told negotiators, "They don't plan on going back to the table any time soon. It might be a month, three weeks or longer."

The hardships resulting from Hurricane Katrina have played a role in the determination of workers to hold out for a better agreement. National Metal Trades Department President Ron Ault explained that 18 months after the storm the quality of life has sharply declined.

"What we are seeing here is something like post-traumatic stress in combat troops. They are fed up with what they see as abandonment and neglect of this region. Our members are the world's best shipbuilders, living in one of the nation's most devastated areas. Something has got to give."

One worker told the *Sun Herald* his rent had increased from \$600 a month to \$1,800 a month. Another worker summed up her attitude, "If I made it through Katrina, I can make it through this strike."

West Virginia governor, labor bureaucracy, seek to quell teacher dissatisfaction

West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin signed a bill providing for a 3.5 percent pay increase to teachers. The pay increase was upped from 2.5 percent in the wake of a sickout by teachers in Monongalia County that shut down the school system on March 6 and widespread sentiment among teachers for a state-wide one-day general strike.

More fuel was added to the fire over the weekend when the West Virginia Senate voted to increase their pay by 33 percent. Middle school teacher Shelley Garlitz told WBOY News 12, "I'm just astonished that after all this time saying 'we can't find money for this or that,' that in the end, they found money to give themselves a raise." Ultimately, amidst the tumult, the West Virginia House refused to introduce the legislative pay raise.

On March 10, teachers rallied on the steps of the West Virginia capital. But AFT President Judy Hale opposed the call for a one-day strike. Jackie Long of the West Virginia School Service Personnel told the rally their union would not "participate in a one-day walkout. That's not our style."

Chemical leak sends Chicago UPS workers to the hospital

A cloud of fumes from a punctured drum at a nearby

plant engulfed workers at a UPS facility in Willow Springs, Illinois, sending eight of them to the hospital. The event occurred on the evening of March 7 after a forklift punctured a 55-gallon drum containing ethyl acrylate, a chemical used in plastics manufacturing that can cause eye, throat and lung irritation.

Pleasantview Fire Chief Dan Hermes told the *Chicago Tribune* he was critical of the failure of Ashland to notify authorities immediately. "My concern is that the spill occurred an hour and a half before we received a call. Had they notified the surrounding area immediately after the spill, the area could have been evacuated and the injuries avoided."

The fire department reported that in addition to the eight workers sent to the hospital, several others were treated near the scene and then released. US Occupational Health and Safety Administration investigators were at the plant the following day gathering information.

Canada

Staff poised to strike against CUPE

Staff employees of the country's largest union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), could be on strike this week if no agreement is reached. Nearly 700 workers, organized in three separate unions, are involved in the dispute with CUPE. Most have been without a contract since 2005.

According to reports, CUPE has demanded numerous concessions from its own workers in the course of bargaining, demands it would never tolerate in the course of normal contract bargaining. The unions involved—COPE, ASU and ATSU—have carried out a campaign of escalating job actions in recent weeks, which could culminate in a full-scale strike by March 16.

Rail car workers set to strike

Two hundred members of the United Steelworkers union employed by Trenton Works east of Toronto voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action, which could begin at any time. Last week workers rejected the employer's final offer, which contained sweeping concession demands and a wage freeze for over three years. The parent company, Greenbrier of Oregon, says it will review the future of the plant in a meeting in April.



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