Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Argentina: workers protest assault on teachers

Argentina's largest labor federations, the General Labor Confederation (CGT) and the Argentine Workers Confederation (CTA), issued a joint call for a 24-hour general strike this Monday to protest the repression of striking teachers in the Patagonian province of Neuquén. A police sergeant has been arrested for firing a tear gas grenade at close range, which hit and killed Carlos Fuentealba, a 41-year-old striking teacher.

The incident occurred when provincial security forces assaulted a march of striking teachers in the city of Neuquén, the provincial capital. News of Fuentealba's death resulted in spontaneous demonstrations across the city. On Good Friday, the traditional Via Crucis procession through Neuquen's poorest neighborhoods was dedicated to Professor Fuentealba. Demonstrations also took place in other parts of the country. In Salta, where teachers have been on strike for six weeks, 1,200 workers marched in a silent protest over the killing.

Eyewitnesses reported that Fuentealba was less than 2 meters from Sergeant Daniel Poblete when the latter fired the projectile. The demonstrators were retreating at the time of the attack. Provincial authorities justified the violent repression, claiming that a group of 150 "Trotskyists" tried to "create chaos" during the protest.

The police assault and the killing of Fuentealba are part of a wave of confrontations across Argentina. The recovery of the economy from the economic crisis of 2001-2003 has led to high levels of economic inequality and persistent joblessness. Teachers' strikes are currently taking place in the Argentine provinces of Córdoba, Santa Cruz, La Rioja, Tierra del Fuego and Salta.

Peruvian miners strike

Nineteen hundred copper miners at the La Oroya copper mine, owned by US-based Doe Run, walked off their jobs on April 2 in a dispute over wages. The strike lasted four days and ended after management agreed to pay union miners a bonus of 2100 new soles (US$350). In addition to copper, the mine also produces zinc, lead, gold and silver.

The city of Oroya, which is currently locked in a struggle with Doe Run over environmental degradation, shut down markets, schools and mass transit in solidarity with the miners. The workers began their strike to demand a greater share of the firm's windfall profits from high metal prices on the world's commodity markets. Management claimed that last year's US$120 million profits had to be lowered to US$85 million to compensate for past losses. The strike contributed to a sudden jump in lead prices last week. The metal reached a historic high of US$2.012 per ton, up from US$1.96.

President Lula at war with air traffic controllers

According to the São Paulo daily, *Folha de São Paulo*, Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula has ordered the Air Force to activate its intelligence service to persecute the organizers of a series of strikes and protests by Brazilian air traffic controllers. On March 30, a protest strike by air traffic controllers shut down air travel across Brazil. Columnist Josías de Souza wrote: "The starting point of the investigation is that military air traffic controllers took the road of a type of syndicalism that is incompatible with military discipline." Government authorities are now calling the job action by air traffic controllers an insurrection and plan to prosecute the organizers, although a promise not to pursue legal measures against the workers was contained in the settlement to end last week's strike.

Brazil utilizes a mixture of military and civilian air traffic controllers under Air Force management. On Thursday, the association that represents military air traffic controllers asked Brazilians for "forgiveness" for the strike and explained that the job action had been an "SOS" from the workers to expose unacceptable and unsafe working conditions. Civilian air traffic controllers have let it be known that they stand in solidarity with their military counterparts and are ready to walk out again in their defense.

United Auto Workers bureaucracy breaks wildcat strike in North Carolina

Officials from the United Auto Workers (UAW) on April 3 ordered an end to a wildcat strike launched the night before by workers at the Freightliner LLC's Cleveland, North Carolina, truck plant. "We want them to know they're supposed to be at work," declared UAW official Willard Beck. "The un-sanctioned 'strike' has been officially called off," said UAW Local 3520 website.

Robert Whiteside, who heads Local 3250's bargaining committee initially told the *Salisbury Post* after pickets first appeared that the strike had been called to protest the refusal of Freightliner company officials to meet with the UAW. In another interview with the *Charlotte Observer*, he declared, "This isn't about money. This is about health and safety. We're fighting for a way of life." But after UAW International officials arrived later in the day, he declined to comment on the situation.

The Cleveland plant had been in an uproar since December when Freightliner announced it would slash 1,200 of the plants 4,000 jobs. The layoffs were to have been implemented the day before workers walked out. The jobs cuts were reportedly the largest by any company in North Carolina since 2003.

Wildcat picketers told reporters they walked out because Freightliner was seeking to slash benefits and freeze pay, and had ignored safety issues. The Cleveland plant is Freightliner's largest truck manufacturing operation and the most profitable. But its pay and benefits are the lowest. As the company's target date for layoffs hit the Cleveland plant, the UAW concluded talks with Freightliner at its 750-member truck plant in nearby Gastonia, North Carolina. The new three-year agreement provided 3-percent-per-year wage increases, first-time pay differentials for second and third shift, and a US$1,500 signing bonus.

Freightliner is a division of DaimlerChrysler, which is seeking to

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spin off its US and Canada car-making operations run by Chrysler Group. The UAW bureaucracy, which is collaborating with management in the elimination of 13,000 Chrysler jobs and more than 100,000 throughout the auto industry, is desperate to prevent any rank-and-file resistance to the massive attack on autoworkers' jobs.

Illinois mine shut after strike

Foundation Holding Co. said it is closing its Wabash mine in Keensburg, Illinois, in the wake of a strike called by the United Mine Workers (UMWA) union at three of its mines last week. The closure affects the jobs of some 235 miners. More than 1,200 UMWA members struck mines in Illinois and Pennsylvania owned by Foundation Coal Holdings April 4, including the Cumberland and Emerald mines in Pennsylvania in addition to the Wabash mine.

The company is demanding concessions from workers at the Wabash mine, claiming the operation is not profitable or competitive. The union charges the company has refused UMWA requests for information and is continuing to treat the three mines as separate operations even though "they are clearly all parts of the same employer." UMWA members at the Wabash mine have already sacrificed about US$30,000 apiece in concessions over the past five years under pressure from the union to help the company reduce costs.

Wabash mine officials say they cannot operate on the basis of the five-year agreement negotiated by the UMWA with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association. The UMWA granted Foundation Coal an additional three months to reach an agreement after the signing of five-year contracts with Consolidation Coal and other members of the BCOA in late 2006.

Las Vegas Casino claims right to physically abuse workers

Appellate judges ruled against a district court decision that backed a Las Vegas, Nevada, casino's strong-arm tactics against its workers. The case arose from an incident where a group of unionized casino workers gathered around a rank-and-file leader during a break for some pre-contract negotiation morale boosting at the Circus Circus Casino. Security guards burst into the room, beat workers and handcuffed the leader.

The US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals declined to support a decision by the district court that backed the casino management's claim that a clause in the union contract that gave them the right to "direct and control" workers sanctioned handcuffing and beating them. The circuit court decision sends the case back to a state court where workers are seeking damages for injuries sustained in the assault.

Massachusetts compiling database to scapegoat teachers for student performance

The Massachusetts Department of Education will compile a database next year that teachers charge can be used to attack their jobs and working conditions. Education department officials say the database is required under the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind initiative and will collect teachers' age, race, salary, licensure, and educational degree, as well as subjects taught and grades issued to students.

The database, dubbed Education Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS), will be linked with an existing student-performance database run by the department. The linking will allow the state to look at poor performance by students and quickly link to their teachers. Some teachers fear that they will become scapegoats for poor student performance that is a result of social and economic conditions and the undermining of public education.

Quincy Education Association President Paul Phillips told the *Patriot Ledger*, "The problem is there is a potential here for a sort of Big Brother aspect to EPIMS, that individual students' scores, for example, on tests could be related to a particular teacher. If a kid doesn't have breakfast, am I responsible? There are hundreds of factors that are beyond our control. We are always worried." In addition, the training and salaries of staff involved in gathering data and the purchasing of software—which could potentially amount to significant sums—are to borne by local school districts without any aid from state or federal governments.

Carlsbad, California, school district approves budget cuts to settle pay dispute

On March 30, the board of trustees at the Carlsbad Unified School District—just north of San Diego, California—voted unanimously in favor of a proposal by Superintendent John Roach that would cut US$2.5 million from the school district's operating budget. A dozen credentialed teachers and dozens of classified hourly employees are to lose their jobs, and an elementary school with an attendance of 300 is scheduled to close. The proposal comes on the heels of months of impasse over a cost-of-living increase in teachers' salaries. The Carlsbad Unified Teachers' Association is seeking a 5.9 percent increase while the school board is offering 2.3 percent, which includes a 1 percent increase already agreed to last year. Since January, the school district has stated that all US$5.5 million in additional funds received from the state treasury have been earmarked and cannot be used for pay increases. The district is now attempting to split classified and credentialed employees, claiming teachers can only obtain their full pay raises at the expense of lower-paid workers, a perspective overwhelmingly rejected by teachers at a rally occurring at a local park immediately before the school board vote.

Year-old fishery lockout ends

A lockout at Clearweater Seafoods fish plant in Cape Breton, which began more than a year ago, came to an end last week when workers voted to accept a deal that will see their pay cut by almost 20 percent, down to C$10 an hour, along with reductions in health and life insurance benefits. Linda MacNeil, a representative from the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), which represents 100 workers at Highland Fisheries in Glace Bay, tried to portray the sell-out deal worked out by the union after one day of bargaining in a good light. She called it "a start," adding, "at this point, we're just happy to see that there's going to be an opportunity for employment."

Cemetery workers to strike

Around 115 workers at the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery in Montreal, Quebec, voted overwhelmingly last week to go on strike in an effort to win a new contract after more than a year of fruitless negotiations. Main issues in the dispute include retirement and severance benefits as well as greater employment stability. Currently, more than half of the workers at the cemetery are considered seasonal and consequently receive lower wages and benefits. Their union is proposing a shorter workweek for all and fewer hours for all workers to provide for the increase in stable jobs.

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