

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Transit strike in Uruguay

Passenger transit was paralyzed on January 17 in Uruguay. The cause of the protest was the murder last Friday night of a 65-year-old taxi driver. The strike was organized by the National Transit Workers Union.

The union announced plans to meet with the nation's interior minister and with the Commission on Transit Safety to discuss new safety measures.

The murdered taxi driver, Homero Cardozo, appears to have been killed for reasons other than robbery; his wallet was left intact at the scene. He was killed in his cab 25 miles from Montevideo at 3 a.m. on January 15.

Mexico: University professors threaten to strike

Academic employees at the University of Sonora in Hermosillo, Mexico, threatened to strike unless they receive a satisfactory wage offer.

Sergio Barranza Felix, who leads the Union of Academic Workers of the University of Sonora, declared: "This is different from past negotiations. The university is dragging its feet. This means there's a large possibility that a strike will take place."

Academic employees are demanding a 20 percent wage increase. They also want changes in the way other benefits are calculated, such as scholarships for employees' family members and other bonuses.

Peru: Miners protest layoffs

The Federation Miners and Metal Workers of Peru said on January 17 that it is prepared to strike. At issue is the layoff of miners as a result of the world financial crisis. Union President Luis Castillo did not give a date for the strike, however, indicating that the decision will be made at the end of this month.

For his part, Roque Benavides, president of the National Confederation of Private Enterprises, declared that the sackings are necessary to save private enterprises from the financial crisis.

The prices of zinc and copper have fallen by more than 60 percent this year. Since November 2008, 5,640 miners have been laid off. According to Castillo, management is using the crisis as a pretext to reduce the workforce and rationalize production.

Nicaragua: Protesting peasants confront police

On January 12, thousands of agricultural workers, small business owners, and peasants, angry over the lack of parliamentary action on debt relief legislation, fought Nicaraguan security forces in Managua. The protest was organized by the Movement of Micro Producers and Wage Earners.

The peasants, who had marched from northern Nicaragua, assembled at the Congress, demanding approval of a debt moratorium from financial institutions that charge annual interest rates that exceed 30 percent on average.

Security forces were sent to disperse the protesting peasants with tear gas. In the ensuing battle, the peasants retreated to the town of San Benito, 20 miles north of Managua, where they blocked the Pan-American Highway. At least 3 peasants were wounded, and 160 others were arrested. The battle lasted all night. Protesters promised that demonstrations would continue until the law is passed.

St. Joseph, Missouri: Box company hires bankruptcy attorneys amid strike

In a move designed to force concessions from striking workers, Smurfit-Stone Container has hired bankruptcy attorneys. The company is one of the country's largest cardboard box manufacturers and employs about 20,000 mostly union workers.

The workers went on strike December 1, 2008, and have continued to picket despite freezing weather and learning of the company's latest maneuver.

If Smurfit-Stone declares bankruptcy, union contracts and pensions may be tossed out or renegotiated. Striking worker Brandon Fakes stated to *St. Joe News*, "If they do declare bankruptcy, it was nobody's fault out here. The decision was made way above."

The news of bankruptcy caused the company stock to plummet last Friday by 80 percent, closing at 6 cents per share.

Tennessee aircraft workers end strike on company terms

Members of the International Association of Machinists Local 735 at Vought Aircraft Industries in Nashville, Tennessee, voted by a 498-190 margin to end their three-and-a-half-month strike under threat by the company to hire permanent replacements. The 900 workers originally opposed the company's demand for benefit concessions by a 94 percent margin back on September 27, 2008, but with the union offering no strategy to combat the company, workers felt compelled to end their strike.

Under the new contract, Vought will eliminate pensions for new employees and freeze pensions for those with less than 16 years of seniority, substituting 401(k) programs. Workers will receive wage increases of 75 cents in the first year and 50 cents in the subsequent two years. However, Vought withdrew a \$3,000 signing bonus that it had originally offered.

Vought also included a \$20,000-to-\$25,000 lump-sum payment to those employees with 16 years' or more seniority, provided they agree to retire by the end of the month. About half of the Nashville plant's workforce has more than 30 years' seniority.

Vought, which is 90 percent owned by the Carlyle Group, operates nine facilities in the United States and employees 5,900 workers.

Pay cuts imposed on workers at YRC Worldwide

Transportation workers at YRC Worldwide voted to take a 10 percent pay cut under pressure from the company and the Teamsters union. The less-than-truckload freight hauler said the

cut is necessary because of lower freight volumes. Workers are to receive a 15 percent stake in the company.

The cuts affect drivers at the company's Roadway, Holland, Yellow Transportation and New Penn units. The company recently laid off 3,750 workers.

About 30,000 of the 40,000 Teamsters members at YRCW voted on the proposed concessions, which passed by a 77 percent margin. The agreement also cancels 3.5 percent annual wage increases that were to extend until 2013 in the current agreement. Total savings to the company are estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$400 million annually.

YRC Worldwide is in the process of merging its terminals at subsidiaries Roadway and Yellow Freight. That process is expected to eliminate as much as 15 to 20 percent of the joint workforce.

Labrador air base workers strike

Three hundred twenty-five civilian workers at the Canadian Forces Base in Goose Bay, Labrador, went on strike January 12 against SERCO, a private company that manages the base.

The strike was called by the Union of National Defence Employees, which is part of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), after what the union calls nine months of futile negotiations.

The unionized workers are employed in a range of jobs from weather forecasting to maintenance. They voted 83 percent against the company's offer in November. A number of workers, such as firefighters and snowplow drivers, remain on the job due to essential service legislation.

Wages are a key issue in the dispute, although the union says there are a large number of other matters that the company has refused to include in negotiations.



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