

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Costa Rican trade unions denounce labor legislation

On February 2, Costa Rican trade union leaders declared that President Oscar Arias's plan to cut the working day as part of a series of measures to confront the global credit crisis is an assault on labor rights. Arias's "labor flexibility plan" has been touted as a way of distributing available jobs among all workers.

"Better for two people to each work half a job at half pay, than for one of them to lose her job forever," Arias had said when he introduced the Escudo [shield] Plan, a series of measures that also include food and rent subsidies.

Union leaders Albino Vargas and Dennis Cabezas called on the president to come up with a jobs program. The Escudo Plan lowers costs at the expense of social legislation.

Chile: Bank workers protest layoffs

The Confederation of Bank Unions (CSB) called on the labor movement to defend wages and jobs. CSB Secretary Luis Mesina declared that the banking industry in Chile is the only one making profits, "On the one hand, lacking any regulation, banks have raised interest rates on loans, both for small and medium companies as well as individuals. In addition, the banks are charging questionable administrative fees that include, for example, additional insurance on loans and

excessive fees for the smallest services."

Mesina also declared that, despite the increased profits, banks have engaged in massive sackings, eliminating an average of 1,000 jobs a month.

Finally, Luis Mesina called on all wage earners suffering from the anti-labor strategies of the employers to work toward a general strike of Chilean workers.

Mexico: Transit workers to strike February 16

Drivers of urban and semi-urban buses say they will call a national strike on February 16 to protest the rise in the price of diesel fuel.

Mario Hernández, leader of the National Confederation of Urban and Semi-Urban Transit Workers (CNTUS), declared that taxi, jitney and bus operators would be joined by operators of food trucks and construction drivers on February 16. Hernández pointed out that the CNTUS had been pleading with Mexican President Felipe Calderón for a freeze in the price of diesel fuel, which now sells at USmce_marker.50 per liter. The government has yet to respond.

Hernández also said that a February 16 24-hour strike would be followed by a strike of indefinite duration beginning on February 18 if its unions' demands are not addressed. The CNTUS represents 500,000 bus operators across Mexico.

Brazil: São Paulo workers strike against layoffs

Workers employed by auto parts producer Schaeffler Brazil went on strike last Thursday over the layoff of

217 workers. Another 400 workers employed by Tubocap Artefatos de Metal, also located in São Paulo, meanwhile temporarily suspended a strike protesting the layoff of 30 workers and the delay in payment of wages and vacation pay. The workers were forced back to work by the Regional Labor Court.

The Brazilian auto industry has seen a decline of 45 percent in production in the last year. Since September 2008, 35,000 autoworkers have lost their jobs, including 800 workers laid off by General Motors from its São José Dos Campos plant in January 2009. Some of these layoffs have been sanctioned by the union, such as the "forced vacation" of 6,000 Mercedes Benz workers that will begin on February 23.

Iowa meatpacker's abuse of mentally handicapped workers exposed

State and federal officials shut down a building February 8 used to house mentally handicapped workers who labored for a meatpacker in Atalissa, Iowa. An Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals administrator described the building used for decades by West Liberty Foods as "deplorable."

West Liberty Foods is owned by Texas-based Henry's Turkey Service, which transported the men from Texas to Iowa. The company paid low wages to the workers and then deducted room and board from their pay, leaving them with as little as little as \$65 a month.

State officials moved 21 workers out of the facility, which was heated only with space heaters. Most of the workers were between 50 and 60 years old, and some had been with the company for 20 years or more.

The operation began in 1979 when the state of Texas referred mentally handicapped men to Henry's Turkey Service, also providing money for skills training. The drafty and cockroach-infested building that housed the workers was owned by the city of Atalissa and rented to Henry's Turkey Service. It is believed that the city conducted no inspections of the premises.

Lehigh Co., PA: Tama Manufacturing, region's

"success story," announces immediate closing

Despite receiving a \$21.9 million contract from the Department of Defense in 2007 and being cited by Barack Obama during his presidential campaign as one of the region's "success" stories, Tama Manufacturing told its nearly 200 employees on Friday that it was closing immediately.

In 2007, workers waged a 15-week strike. The Tama factory dates back to the 1940s, when a number of garment shops abandoned New York seeking lower wages in Pennsylvania.

The Tama plant was one of the few remaining textile plants open in the Lehigh Valley, which today has a jobless rate of 7.1 percent.

Cemetery workers vote to strike

Workers at the Little Lake Cemetery in Peterborough, east of Toronto, voted 100 percent to take strike action after management backed out of a tentative contract settlement.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) had reached an agreement for a three-year contract last October, but the union says that the economic downturn prompted management to reassess the deal, which included a small wage increase and pension provisions.

The union has applied for a government ruling that would put it in a legal strike position February 23. Mediation is set to begin next week.



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