

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 March 2009

## Venezuela: Toyota workers strike

The strike by autoworkers in Venezuela against the Toyota assembly plant is now entering its third week. The plant is located in the city of Cumaná, 170 miles east of Caracas. On March 20, Toyota announced that its production could fall by 25 percent, from 24,000 to 18,000 vehicles, as a consequence of the walkout.

Striking autoworkers have taken over the plant to press their demand that Toyota restore their medical insurance and the right to buy a car at a discount. Toyota management called the occupation illegal, saying it is an action by a small group of disgruntled workers that lost their benefits for not doing what was expected of them.

Also on strike are workers at the MMC auto assembly plant, a joint venture of Mitsubishi, Hyundai and Fuso. In that strike, workers have occupied the plant since January 12.

## Puerto Rico: Newspaper employees protest wage cuts

Members of the union of Reporters and Graphic Arts Workers (UPAGRA) employed by *El Vocero de Puerto Rico* protested on March 19 against wage cuts. UPAGRA President Nestor Soto declared that the purpose of the protest was to expose the abuses of *Vocero's* president Miguel Roca, who claims that the newspaper's problems are the result of the economic crisis.

"Newspaper employees have accepted wage cuts of up to 15 percent of their wages," said Soto. He also indicated that the payment of wages has been delayed up to four days.

The 30 protestors carried signs saying, "*El Vocero* left me without a medical plan. *El Vocero* is anti-worker, *El Vocero* left me without money."

In addition to the wage and benefit cut, Roca has also reduced vacation days from 30 to 20 and has sacked workers and assigned supervisors to do their jobs. Management has also

threatened to shut down the newspaper. If *El Vocero* closes its doors, it would follow the *San Juan Star*, which closed its doors seven months ago.

## Dominican Republic: Demonstrators demand social services

Twelve people were arrested March 17 by Dominican police as a result of protests in more than 10 cities across the country demanding improvement in public services. In the city of Navarrette, protestors confronted the police. They were demanding the reconstruction of the local highway, the provision of clean water and an end to electricity blackouts.

Protests have also taken place in the city of Los Cocos de Jacagua. The demonstrators battled the police with sticks and stones and burned tires on the streets. Victor Breton, leader of the Front of Popular Struggle (FALPO), declared that the protests are part of a plan of mobilizations that have taken place to demand an end to blackouts, better sanitation and lower food prices.

## Dominican Republic: Public health employees, transport workers on strike

Public health doctors and nurses walked off their jobs last Thursday. The strikers marched in the vicinity of the Salvador B. Gautier Hospital in Santo Domingo. Marchers also picketed the Public Health Ministry.

Dominican public health doctors are demanding a minimum wage of \$1,636, up from \$250 a month. The government says it does not have the money to finance wage increases for doctors.

Also on strike are bus drivers in the country's northeast as well as truck drivers in the eastern region. The latter suspended their services for 12 hours on Thursday to demand the government fix the region's roads.

## Ohio chemical workers mark six weeks on strike

Workers at Dover Chemical Corporation's Dover, Ohio, plant are concluding their sixth week on strike against concessions with no settlement in sight. Company Vice-President of Operations Tom Freeman cited a 60 percent drop in the company's February sales, declaring the company "can no longer afford to pay benefits and other premiums that are well above market average conditions if it wishes to be able to continue to operate in this changing global economy."

Teamsters Local 92 President Robert Jackson said the company had dismissed "virtually every proposal by the union." The company put forward a last, best and final offer on January 31. Union workers responded by voting 104-2 against that contract. At the beginning of March, the company made a new offer to the union, but no details were made public. The company also requested a restraining order against union pickets after reports of picket line clashes.

Dover Chemical manufactures a wide variety of chemical additives both in Ohio and in Hammond, Indiana. It is a subsidiary of New York-based ICC Industries, Inc.

### **American Airlines pilots' union censures top officers**

The board of the Allied Pilots Association censured its top two officers March 29 charging them with "frequently failing to adhere to the policies, directives, and resolutions of the board of directors." A union spokesman declined to elaborate on the issue.

Union Vice-President Tom Westbrook, who along with President Lloyd Hill was the target of the censure, stated, "This is internal politics, basically, so it probably wouldn't be appropriate for me to comment."

Rank-and-file pilots elect union officers for the Allied Pilots Association. But the direction of the union is determined by an 18-member board comprised of two officials from each of the nine pilot bases in American Airline's system. The union has been negotiating changes to its 2003 contract. In 2007 pilots demanded pay raises of more than 50 percent that would that would return wages to 1992 levels.

### **Montana: Miners strike Rosebud coal mine**

Some 300 miners at Western Energy's Rosebud Mine near Colstrip, Montana, went on strike March 20. The answering service at the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 400 merely states, "As of midnight Friday night we are on strike," giving no details.

A spokesman for Western Energy claimed the company had

offered the union a four-year agreement with an increase of \$1.15 an hour in the first year, and an additional \$2.70 an hour spread out over the three remaining years. The company did not make clear whether its offer altered pensions, benefits and work rules.

Western Energy is a subsidiary of the Westmoreland Coal Company, the oldest independent coal company in the United States, with operations in Montana, North Dakota and Texas. It also operates a coal-fired power plant in North Carolina.

### **Vancouver food workers strike**

Over 700 food service workers employed at General Motors Place, an arena in downtown Vancouver, staged a one-day strike last week against Aramark, a multi-national company based in Philadelphia. Within days of the strike the two sides reached a tentative deal, giving workers around a 20 percent wage hike over three years.

The workers, who voted 83 percent in favor of job action last month, had been without a contract since late last year. They carried out their job action during a National Hockey League game, with the British Columbia Federation of Labour calling on fans to honor their picket line.

The workers, who are organized under the Unite Here union, reportedly made some further gains in benefits and job security. It is not clear whether the agreement addresses workers' demands for employment at the 2010 Winter Olympics.



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