

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 December 2003

Newspaper strike in Uruguay

One hundred employees of *La Republica*, a Montevideo daily, struck November 21 to demand the rehiring of eight fired employees, six of whom are union representatives. The strikers have taken over the newspaper's offices.

Federico Fasano, an Argentine businessman who owns *La Republica*, has intimated he is ready to close the newspaper and open another one, "with replacement workers, of course." Fasano's company also owns a radio station and a TV channel. Last year Fasano sacked 70 employees of the newspaper.

The company, which is US\$6 million in debt, owes the workers back wages for October. It offered to pay only those workers that cross the picket line.

Two dead in Peruvian strike

Two striking peasants were killed and three were wounded on November 27 as a result of a confrontation with police in the city of Carhuamayo, 165 kilometers north of Lima. The peasants had blocked a highway to press their demands for payment for construction work and compensation for the contamination of Lake Chinchaycocha by mining companies.

According to an Associated Press report, a local radio reporter said police fired point blank at strikers.

The confrontation came a day after the leader of the Junin state, which includes Carhuamayo, called the protest demanding the government hand over US\$58 million from the sale of a state electricity company and pave a stretch of highway.

Ecuadorian teachers strike

A strike by 120,000 public school teachers is now in its second week. The educators are demanding the government of Lucio Gutierrez carry out a June agreement to raise their wages and increase funding for education. That agreement helped end an earlier 28-day walkout.

Ernesto Castillo, president of the teachers union (UNE), is demanding that Gutierrez meet with him in a public debate on school funding. The government says that, while it is willing to continue negotiations with the strikers, it will not allocate more funds for education.

Striking teachers marched in Quito on November 25 and have threatened to begin blocking highways across the country.

Tens of thousands march across Mexico against privatizations

More than 100,000 workers and peasants marched under torrential rain in Mexico City to repudiate a draft reform

proposal from President Vicente Fox that would privatize electric utilities and extend the Value Added Tax (VAT).

The demonstrators rallied at the Zocalo Plaza, Mexico City's principal square. In addition to speeches there was music and fireworks.

President Fox's reforms to the Mexican Constitution would allow foreign ownership in the electricity sector. The government also proposes to lower the VAT from 15 to 10 percent, but to extend this regressive tax to medicine and food, which are now excluded from the tax. This measure would drastically lower living standards for the poor, who use a large percentage of their income to buy food. Some of the marchers carried a large image of Fox, made out of dried ears of corn, with US flags and dollars coming out of his pockets.

In addition to members of the electrical workers union (SUTERM), other unions represented included teachers, university employees and public employees. Similar marches took place in Guadalajara, Campeche, Oaxaca and Tlaxcala.

In Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, about 10,000 marched, including members of the National Workers Union (UNT,) telephone employees, social security and hospital employees.

Brazilian workers strike against Embraer

On November 27, 4,000 metal workers voted to strike Brazilian airplane manufacturer Embraer, located in the Sao Paulo suburb of Sao Jose dos Campos. Union representatives informed the company that production would cease if management failed to address workers' wage demands.

So far, Embraer has offered a 16.5 percent wage increase. The workers are demanding 20 percent to compensate for inflation, a bonus of R\$2,000 (about US\$680) a shorter workweek with no loss in pay and no changes in benefits.

Ohio company closes plant in response to strike

Gray Printing in Fostoria, Ohio, closed its doors November 26 in response to a strike by 59 members of the Graphics International Communications Union 566M. The union called the strike over unfair labor practice charges, which are slowly making their way through the Labor Department and won't be heard until February 2004.

Gray Printing President Robert Gray told the *Advertiser-Tribune*, "We tried to negotiate a contract that would save costs but it was rejected. We offered to keep the terms of the present contract, just for a year, and they would not accept it either." Union printers are angry they work for

US\$13 an hour while their counterparts in Toledo make \$17 to \$28 an hour. Striker Bobbie Welly, complained, "We've heard this for 16 years, that they're going to close the doors and you can only cry wolf for so long before people say, 'I'm tired.'"

Pennsylvania chemical workers strike over benefits

Workers at Air Products and Chemicals Inc., in Hanover Township, Pennsylvania, are into their second week on strike over health insurance and overtime compensation. The 147 members of the International Association of Machinists Local 2200 rejected a four-year labor contract the previous week. The pact had been negotiated to replace the old agreement that expired on November 21.

Neither Local 2200 President Joe Solinski nor Business Agent Gene Woodruff has commented on the contract's rejection. According to an Air Products spokesperson, the union's negotiating committee unanimously recommended the agreement. No new negotiations are scheduled.

Air Products produces chemicals and gases for an international market and has plants in 30 countries with more than 18,000 employees.

Workers strike New York laundry

About 140 workers struck the Jung Sun Laundry on Long Island, New York, November 28 after the company refused to agree to the same contract negotiated with 35 other New York laundries. The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees reached an agreement with other laundries that will pay 80 cents an hour over three years with a \$300 bonus in the third year. Jung Sun workers presently make US\$8.60 an hour.

Jung Sun Laundry said the events of September 11, 2001, had devastated their business and refused to go along with a pattern settlement. World Cleaners in Brooklyn is the only other laundry that has not concluded a contract and could possibly face strike action this week.

In the past, UNITE has negotiated an industry-wide pact for New York laundry workers. But when the laundries insisted on negotiating separately, it agreed to enter into negotiations on the companies' terms.

Texas refinery workers protest burdensome on-call policy change

Workers at the Lyondell-Citgo refinery in Houston, Texas picketed the plant November 28 to protest the company's refusal to discuss grievances over working conditions. The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) union filed four separate grievances involving a unilateral change of policy by the company that rotates pagers among maintenance workers at the plant.

The effect of the policy is to force workers to cancel vacations and remain close to the plant during their off hours. They risk disciplinary action should they be called into work after having consumed alcohol. Workers can be called in to work an eight-hour emergency shift and then be forced to remain on the job if the next eight hours is their regular shift.

The Houston plant is a joint venture between Lyondell and

Citgo and processes extra heavy Venezuelan crude oil to produce gasoline, low-sulfur diesel and jet fuel. Lyondell is a highly leveraged company whose debt levels are expected to remain high until profits improve. Meanwhile, it has benefited from a long-term, fixed-margin crude supply agreement. Citgo's ultimate parent is Petroleos de Venezuela, the national oil company.

Logger continue strike in British Columbia

Ten thousand loggers and sawmill workers in British Columbia's forestry industry remain off the job in a strike that has closed at least 25 sawmills and the majority of logging operations in the province. The strike was called after the forestry companies, represented by the Forest Industrial Relations (FIR) group and supported by a Labour Board ruling, used the expiry of the old collective agreement as an opportunity to unilaterally impose drastic concessions on the workers, resulting in an immediate cut of 15 percent in labor costs.

The workers are represented by the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of Canada. The union initially asked workers to stay on the job, but then called the strike in an attempt to contain workers' outrage over the Labour Board ruling and subsequent concessions. The union has exempted financially troubled Doman Industries from a strike, falsely identifying workers' interests with the profitability of the companies.

The president of the union, Dave Haggard, is reportedly on vacation.

University of Victoria teaching assistants to hold strike vote

Eight hundred teaching assistants at the University of Victoria will be holding a strike vote during the first week of December. The teaching assistants, who are currently paid \$17.49 per hour, are demanding wage parity with other British Columbia universities. They are also protesting a 70 percent increase in tuition fees (paying tuition is a condition of employment). The teaching assistants, represented by Local 4163 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, have been without a contract since August.

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