

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 March 2004

Tugboat workers strike in Trinidad

On March 8, tugboat operators at the Atlantic LNG plant in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago went on strike, causing the temporary suspension of shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the United States. Trinidad and Tobago is the main exporter of LNG to the US.

The strike began when the tugboat operators declared themselves in solidarity with construction workers building an LNG plant; the construction workers are demanding a wage increase in compensation for the dangerous nature of their work.

The tugboat operators ended their job action on Wednesday, March 10. The construction strike is still going on.

Atlantic LNG exports 9.7 million tons of LNG each year. It hopes to increase its exports to 15 million, once the new plant is finished in 2005. The company is part of a transnational consortium, which includes some of the biggest global energy firms, such as the British BP and BG Group, Spanish Repsol and Belgium's Tractebel.

Argentine hospital workers strike

On March 11, non-medical personnel went on a 48-hour strike against several public hospitals in Buenos Aires. The workers belong to the Association of State Employees (ATE). The job action involved nurses, technicians and administrative workers.

The workers are demanding a wage increase of \$80 per month. Last week, workers struck for 24 hours. ATE leaders have said that if their wage demands are not addressed, they will organize a 72-hour strike this week.

Doctors strike, university workers protest in Bolivia

The government of President Carlos Mesa is facing growing demands by professionals and workers in Bolivia. On March 10, public health doctors began a two-day strike to demand a wage increase. Specifically, the doctors ask that there be a change in job category to bump them up to a higher wage.

University workers have declared that they will protest this week to press for a 28 percent budget increase, up from the government's proposed 3 percent. The Mesa administration claims that it cannot afford any increases because of the high budget deficit, which is currently 8

percent of GDP, and because businesses and the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) resist tax increases.

Another banana workers' strike in Panama

Three thousand workers at banana plantations along Panama's Pacific coast that once belonged to the US transnational Chiquita Brands began a strike on March 10.

The workers are demanding the election of a new union leadership and the raising of their wages to the level they earned before the sale of the plantations.

This is the second strike in less than two weeks against the union-owned workers' cooperative (COSEMUPAR) that bought the plantation when Chiquita withdrew on the grounds that labor costs were too high.

COSEMUPAR President Edgar Williams, who is also a union leader, declared that the union leaders would resign; but in a veiled threat, he declared that the banana plantations are in crisis and that, were the strike to continue, the plantation itself would close. Williams also alleged that current labor costs are above the price of bananas.

Minnesota governor moves to undermine bus strike

Minnesota Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty announced March 12 that Metro Transit will shift some \$100,000 a week in grants to social service agencies. These agencies would then provide transportation to Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan commuters as the strike by 2,200 transit workers entered its second week. Members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1005, who were rallying along with other workers at the University of Minnesota, denounced the measure as union busting.

The funds will be drawn from the approximately \$220,000 a day the state saves while the transit system is shut down. Pawlenty declined to provide any details for his plan, except to say, "Those who depend on public transportation need some relief."

"It's the first step on the road to privatization," said David Schaefer, a striking driver with nearly 10 years' seniority, from a picket line in south Minneapolis. "Pawlenty is trying to see what he can get away with. Who could object to giving rides to people who need to go to the hospital? It makes him look good. But I'd be really surprised if it ends there. It's a first step, and it will go on, and on, and on, until this [transit system] is a private company."

“There are certain things that work better without a profit motive—education, public safety, mass transit—and I would argue for health care as well.”

The Metropolitan Council, which manages the transit system for the state, is demanding sweeping concessions from transit workers. Family health care payments for some workers will rise from the present \$265 a month to \$304 a month in the first year and \$401 a month in the second year of a two-year contract. Wages will rise only 1 percent in the contract’s second year while starting pay for new hires will plummet from \$15.67 an hour to \$12.00 an hour. No new talks have been scheduled, as the Metropolitan Council has refused to return to the bargaining table.

Teamsters union agrees to restraints on pickets by Oklahoma company

The Teamsters union and Sysco Food Services of Oklahoma, Inc. came to a private agreement over rules seeking to restrict picketing activities in the strike by 120 drivers and warehouse workers at the Norman, Oklahoma distribution plant. The agreement between management and the leadership of Teamsters Local 886 resulted in the cancellation of a hearing scheduled last week to place a temporary restraining order on union pickets. Ivan Moore, president of Sysco, welcomed the agreement, saying it would facilitate an “orderly course of business.”

The union has submitted four complaints against the company that the National Labor Relations Board has consolidated and scheduled for hearing on April 20. Besides a charge against the company for failure to negotiate in good faith during the present contract talks, the union alleges that the company fired two workers for union activities and obstructed requests by workers that union stewards be present during meetings with management.

Sysco workers walked off the job February 29. The old contract expired last year on October 3.

Colorado steelworkers return to work without contract

Steelworkers at Rocky Mountain Steel Mills in Pueblo, Colorado voted to end their six-year strike without a contract after the United Steelworkers (USW) and management reached agreement on the reinstatement of workers with a provision for some back pay. About 80 percent of the striking workers sent in mail ballots that showed a 334-to-80 ratification margin.

The Securities and Exchange Commission must still approve part of the deal worked out between the USW bureaucracy and Oregon Steel, which owns Rocky Mountain Steel. The company has agreed to transfer 4 million shares of stock in Oregon Steel to a trust fund whose stock will be used to compensate with back pay those workers who were not recalled after a 13-week strike was officially ended in 1997. In exchange for the union bureaucracy’s services in

isolating and defeating the walkout, the agreement also provides for the ascension of a union representative to the board of directors of Oregon Steel. The USW claims the contract is also supposed to allow some 200 workers to take early pensions.

Mechanics strike over working conditions at New York auto dealerships

More than 100 workers rallied in Bayside, New York to protest against the management of several Toyota auto dealerships for abusive treatment of mechanics. About a dozen mechanics have been on strike since last October over unfair labor practices by the auto dealers.

Worker launches suit charging toxic dust exposure at Nevada nuclear waste dump

Gene Griego, a tunnel supervisor at Nevada’s Yucca Mountain nuclear waste site, has filed a civil lawsuit charging that Bechtel Corp. and its subsidiaries knowingly exposed workers and visitors to dangerous levels of silica and other toxic dust during tunnel construction between 1992 and 1996. Griego, a nonsmoker who was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease last year, called the coverup an “outrageous fraud against the workforce and even the visitors at Yucca Mountain, one that’s already killing people.”

In January of this year, screenings of current and former Yucca Mountain workers were begun to investigate the possibility that up to 1,500 may have been exposed. In February, the Energy Department began investigating allegations that documents have been altered to obscure the potential dangers at the site.

In 2002, the Energy Department obtained approval from the Bush administration and Congress to store 77,000 tons of radioactive waste at Yucca Mountain.

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