

Workers struggles around the world: The Americas

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Jersey City teachers defy strike ban

Two thousand five hundred teachers and one thousand support personnel in Jersey City, New Jersey went out on strike last Thursday in a contract dispute over working conditions and wages in the 32,000-student district. On the same day, Judge Martin Greenberg of the Hudson Superior Court declared the strike illegal, and ordered the teachers back to work. Under the court order, district leaders have to serve every striking union member with individual legal notices to compel them to return to work. Thus far, the teachers have defied the back-to-work order. As a result, Judge Greenberg has fined the Jersey City Educational Association \$100,000 each day of the strike. The district is seeking to impose fines against individual union members as well.

Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler has urged the Board of Education to hire more substitute teachers to break the strike. Governor Christie Whitman demanded an immediate end to the strike. Principals tried to run the five high schools on Thursday with fewer than 200 substitute teachers not represented by the union. However, the students rebelled after being herded into auditoriums and gymnasiums, and by mid-morning the high schools were closed. Attendance at grammar schools was down 60 percent.

Teachers are upset over many recent changes instituted by state Superintendent Dr. DiPatri who oversees the district, including a 'negative evaluation system' which consists of surprise visits to the classrooms. Teachers feel they are being scapegoated for the district's poor educational statistics, which led the state to take over schools more than 10 years ago. Teachers also oppose the attempt to extend the school day by 15 minutes and the school year by two days, as well as cut the lunch break from 45 to 30 minutes. Instead, they are calling for reduced class sizes and for the state supervisor to resign.

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FedEx pilots union calls off strike threat

Union negotiators representing 3,500 pilots at Federal Express agreed November 20 to call off the union ban on working overtime and end their threat to strike during the busy holiday season. The agreement includes a pledge not to strike for at least 60 days from the FedEx Pilots Association.

The day previous FedEx announced that it had successfully contracted outside carriers for international flights and was prepared to expand its ground transportation within the US to meet the threat of a pilots strike. FedEx founder and chairman of the parent corporation FDX, Frederick Smith, had warned the pilots that the company would continue to work 'with or without you.'

Earlier on November 16, FDX obtained an additional \$1 billion line of credit to help it weather a possible strike. After the union's surrender management announced significant portions of its international flights would still be taken over by outside contractors in the next number of weeks. FedEx's stock also rose sharply after the announcement.

The FedEx Pilots Association had been trying to obtain its first contract since its members broke away from the Airline Pilots Association in 1996. Union and company negotiators had stalled on wages, job security and scheduling. FedEx was offering a 17 percent wage increase, while pilots are demanding a 24 percent raise. Rank-and-file pilots, who have twice rejected union proposals since 1995, were angered by the union's latest capitulation. Negotiations are set to resume November 23.

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Northwest Airline mechanics throw out machinists union

Mechanics at Northwest Airlines have voted to decertify the International Association of Machinists (IAM) union and instead affiliate to the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), a smaller craft union. The National Mediation Board said 5,160 votes were cast in favor of AMFA, and only 3,905 for the IAM. Nearly all 9,000 Northwest mechanics participated in the vote.

There has been a steady growth of rank-and-file opposition to the IAM for its concessionary contracts with NWA. Last spring angry workers in the Minneapolis and Detroit locals drove union officials off the platform during union meetings and then overwhelmingly rejected the IAM-supported contract proposal.

The vote is expected to delay labor contract talks with NWA. Meanwhile, the airline, the fourth largest in the US, announced that it was merging with Continental Airlines, a move aimed at expanding routes and taking advantage of lower labor costs.

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Labor board backs ABC-TV in lockout dispute

The regional director of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in New York City ruled Thursday that ABC-TV's lockout of 2,200 technical workers is legal. A day earlier another regional director in Los Angeles supported ABC's contention that picketing union members were interfering with news coverage, and gave the company a court order restraining the workers. The dispute began when the union, the National

Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), called a surprise 24-hour strike on November 2 to protest ABC's refusal to provide detailed information about the health plan that they want their unionized workers to accept.

ABC, which is owned by the Walt Disney company, responded by locking out the striking workers. The NLRB director in New York ruled that ABC did all it could to obtain information from the insurers about the cost of medical procedures and give it to the union.

ABC-Walt Disney has refused to allow the workers to return until NABET agrees to give management advance notice of any future job actions. Thus far the union has refused. Both sides have not been able to negotiate a contract since the last one expired March 31, 1997. Besides the health care issue, Walt Disney is seeking to establish a more flexible work force at ABC that would allow it to increase its use of temporary and part-time employees.

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Continental Tire hiring strikebreakers

Continental General began hiring strikebreakers last week to replace the 1,450 members of the United Steelworkers of America Local 850 who walked out September 20 at a plant in Charlotte, North Carolina. The workers struck over wage and benefit issues after their three-year contract expired. The workers have worked under a concessionary contract since 1995 and have not had a general wage increase in nine years. Continental General is the US division of Germany's Continental AG.

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Steelworkers call for federal mediation in Kaiser strike

The United Steel Workers union has called for federal mediation in the eight-week-old strike by 3,000 workers against Kaiser Aluminum. The move came after two days of talks between company and union officials broke off without an agreement or the scheduling of future meetings. The strike originated over Kaiser's plan to reduce its work force by 20 to 30 percent at five plants in Washington state, Ohio and Louisiana.

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Disney World workers reject second contract

Union employees at the Orlando, Florida Disney World voted 2,434 to 1,320 to reject a contract offer that requires them to work longer hours in the subtropical heat with shorter breaks. Workers also objected to new healthcare premiums that would offset wage increases of 5 to 8 percent.

While Disney workers make more than their counterparts at other Florida theme parks such as Universal Studios and SeaWorld Orlando, they lag behind wages of other workers at tourist destinations such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City where workers make up to 40 percent more.

The 2 to 1 voting margin involved only a portion of the 9,000 members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who work as costumed labor at the giant theme park. Disney World, with 51,000 employees, is the largest private sector work site. The Service Trades Council Union, comprised of six labor unions, represents 22,000 of the company's hourly workers.

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Contract expires for 663,000 US Post Office workers

The contract between the US Postal Service and its three largest unions, representing 663,000 workers, expired November 20. None of the unions hinted at the possibility of calling a walkout, which is barred by federal law. The last two rounds of contract talks between the agency and the same unions, in 1990 and 1994, reached impasses and final agreements were reached under binding arbitration.

Negotiations for new contracts began in August. The Postal Service has recorded nearly \$5 billion in profits in the past four years and workers are demanding a significant pay raise. With electronic mail cutting into the agency's income, postal officials are reportedly taking a hard line on labor costs.

Negotiations involve the American Postal Workers Union with 361,253

members, the National Association of Letter Carriers, 241,303 members, and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union, 61,083 members.

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Temporary workers sue Microsoft

Temporary workers at Microsoft have filed a new lawsuit to press for benefits which regular employees have at the Seattle-based software company. In July, a US district judge limited the scope of an earlier lawsuit, claiming it only applied to 200 to 300 temporaries who worked from 1987 through 1990. The new lawsuit includes workers hired after 1990. In addition to seeking participation in a stock plan, workers are demanding company-paid healthcare benefits.

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Caribbean Club Med strike settled

The union representing employees at the posh Club Med on the Caribbean island of Martinique came to a settlement with the resort chain November 19, in the aftermath of a police attack on a hotel occupation by strikers. The union climbed down from its demand for an 8 percent wage increase and accepted 3.5 percent.

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Mexican sugar cane growers strike

The union representing nearly half of Mexico's sugar cane growers launched a work stoppage November 17 to protest the government's setting of a low standard reference price for cane. The union met with officials from the Agriculture and Trade Ministry to review the government's sugar price calculation, which was set for 3,516 pesos per ton for the 1998-99 growing season. This year's crop is expected to come in below last year's 5.17 million ton harvest.

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Sugar cane strike ended in Brazil

Sugar cane workers ended their six-day strike over pay in Brazil's northern state of Pernambuco. Picketing workers at the Santa Teresa mill in the town of Goiana were attacked by private security guards and military police. One cane-cutter was killed and thirteen injured. Details of the settlement were not available.

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Canadian paper strike ends

After five months on the picket lines, 4,000 workers at 10 Abitibi-Consolidated paper mills in eastern Canada have voted 74 percent in favor of accepting a new contract.

The leadership of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union is calling the contract a victory, but this is belied by the facts. The contract will last for an unprecedented six years. Moreover, the union has agreed to the company's demand for mill-by-mill negotiations on work rules. This regressive settlement is now expected to serve as the pattern for negotiating new contracts for 25,000 other pulp and paper workers in Eastern Canada.

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Ontario hospital unions postpone strike action

Last week, the Ontario Council of Hospital Workers set, then withdrew, a Monday, November 23 strike deadline for support staff at 160 Ontario hospitals. A strike by the 50,000 Council members would have meant a showdown with the provincial Tory government and not just because the hospitals are dependent on the Ontario government for their financing. Under Ontario labor law, it is illegal for hospital workers to strike.

Union leaders justified their decision to postpone the strike by claiming that the Ontario Hospitals Association had agreed to delay referring the contract dispute to a government-appointed arbitration panel. But by the weekend, the deal to continue negotiations and delay the start of the arbitration process appeared to have collapsed. The unions say also that Tory modifications to the arbitration system have made it unjust.

Despite the threats of massive fines, the support staff--who include hospital porters, housekeepers, cafeteria staff, technicians and ambulance

drivers--voted 70 and 80 percent in favor of strike action.

The hospitals, which have seen over a billion dollars cut from their budgets since the Conservatives took office three years ago, want to gut restrictions on the contracting out of work and have offered wages increases of between 3 and 5 percent over the life of a five-year agreement. The workers, whose average annual pay is \$26,000, have not had a wage increase since the beginning of the decade.

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Ontario school district lifts lockout

Under pressure from parents and students, the York public school board has lifted its lockout of 3,214 elementary teachers at 108 schools. With the lockout ended, the teachers have launched a campaign of rotating strikes.

The school board, meanwhile, is standing pat on its demand that the teachers accept a \$300 signing bonus in lieu of a wage increase and a 20-minute per day reduction in their paid lesson preparation-time.

The lockout was clearly aimed at provoking provincial government intervention against the teachers. Earlier this fall, the Tory provincial government legislated an end to strikes and lockouts in eight school districts, empowering Tory-appointed arbitrators to dictate teachers' wages and working conditions.

At the root of the teacher disputes in Ontario are the Tories' massive cuts to education spending and changes to teachers' working conditions, including a government-ordered cut in many teachers' paid lesson preparation-time.

See Also:

Workers Struggles: Australia, Asia and Pacific

[21 November 1998]

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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Workers Struggles: The Americas

[17 November 1998]



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