

Workers struggles: North America

8 December 1998

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UAW calls off University of California grad students strike

The United Auto Workers union called off the four-day strike by 9,000 teaching assistants at eight University of California campuses Monday without achieving an agreement from management to recognize the Association of Graduate Student Employees, an affiliate of the UAW, and allow collective bargaining. The union said it had 'recessed' the strike and agreed to a 45-day 'cooling-off period' proposed by state Democrats in an effort to establish a 'mutually productive relationship' with UC administration. Teaching assistants were sent back to the classrooms just in time for final examinations.

The action was the fourth such strike in six years and the first involving all general admissions campuses--Berkeley, Los Angeles, San Diego, Davis, Santa Barbara, Irvine, Riverside and Santa Cruz. More than 129,000 students were affected. The strike won widespread sympathy from both students and professors.

Teaching assistants, or TAs, help lecture, lead discussions, provide tutoring services and grade exams. Universities have more and more relied on TAs as a form of cheap labor. It is estimated at UCLA that TAs conduct 60 percent of the face-to-face instructional sessions with students. They earn \$13,329 to \$15,862 to teach an undergraduate course over a two-semester period and work 16 to 20 hours per week.

UC administration takes the position that TAs are students and not employees, and that they are not eligible for collective bargaining rights. Negotiations will begin in 10 days. While union officers said they would approach the talks in 'good faith,' UC systems President Richard Atkinson reiterated his position that teaching assistants should have no collective bargaining rights.

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Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania teachers strike against concessions

One hundred fifty-nine teachers in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, went on strike December 2 against cuts in health benefits and to seek a pay raise. Teachers have been working without a contract for four years and have not had a pay raise since 1994. They are among the lowest paid teachers in the state. The school district is seeking to force teachers to pay on

average more than \$1,000 a year to maintain their current healthcare coverage.

The strike in Wilkesburg is the first by teachers in Allegheny County this year and only the seventh in the state. Teacher strikes have declined since a law enacted by the Democratic administration of former governor Robert Casey made teachers strikes illegal if they prevented students from obtaining 180 school days by June 30. If no contract is reached teachers will be forced back to work in early January. Over 2,000 children attend grades K-12 in the district. Teachers are members of the Wilkesburg Education Association and the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

The Wilkesburg school district has been hit hard by declining per capita income and cuts in funding from the state government. A working class suburb on the east side of Pittsburgh, Wilkesburg has been affected the layoffs in steel, electronics and related manufacturing jobs. More than three out of four school children come from low-income families. In addition the district has suffered from a change in state funding for special education, and spends approximately half as much per student as nearby wealthier districts.

Over the opposition of the majority of residents, the school board hired APS (Alternative Public Schools), a private education enterprise, to run one of its elementary schools. APS fired the school's 24 teachers and replaced them with those hired by APS. This was the first time in the country that a private, for profit, company took over and ran a public school and hired its own teachers.

After three years a series of legal challenges ended APS control of the school, but not before it drained much needed resources from other schools. In the interim the state passed laws allowing the opening up of charter schools. Republican Governor Ridge is pushing to further scrap public education by funding vouchers to private schools and changing the law to promote companies like APS.

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Airline agents sue TWA

Twenty sales reservation agents are suing Trans World Airlines for \$7.5 million over a scheme that forced agents to pay for training in order to obtain employment. Ads in *Seventeen* and *Working Mother* magazines describe a course which would cost job applicants \$350 with an additional \$3,000 payroll deduction upon employment.

Brian Kabateck, a lawyer representing the agents, called the

airlines' conduct in the matter a 'despicable practice of forcing low-income job applicants to pay money to TWA as a condition of employment. By illegally deducting the cost of the course from the sales reservation agents' wages of \$5.07 an hour, TWA evaded California labor laws and ended up paying its sales reservation agents an amount below the minimum wage.'

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Washington apple pickers protest conditions

A delegation of eight workers who pick apples in Washington state met with officials of Mexico's NAFTA Administration Office to describe the apple industry's antiunion activities, as well as the lack of decent wages and benefits and the poor health and safety conditions they confront.

Mexican immigrants comprise a majority of the 45,000 workers who pick and sort apples in Washington's counties of Yakima and Chelan. A coalition of Mexican unions, backed by the Teamsters and United Farm Workers in the US, filed a 30-page complaint in May of this year charging the apple industry with discrimination against the workers.

'We don't expect a resolution through this process,' said John August, a Teamsters official. The Teamsters have launched an organizing campaign among the apple pickers, but complain that industry management has frustrated their attempts.

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US Airways guilty of sex discrimination in salaries

US Airways has agreed to pay \$390,000 in back pay and salary adjustments to 30 women after an audit by the Labor Department's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs found women managers received less compensation than their male counterparts. The airline called the pay practices 'anomalies in the company's early history.' It is believed the practice grew out of the financial trouble that US Airways experienced during the 1990s.

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Government reaches tentative agreement with postal unions

The US Postal Service reached tentative agreements December 2 with the American Postal Workers Union and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union. Details of the settlements are not available, although the APWU claims it obtained an 18-month ban on contracting out of postal jobs. The pacts still require ratification by union members.

Talks with the National Association of Letter Carriers broke off November 20 and no new talks are scheduled. Presently, the Postal Workers Union represents 361,253 employees, the Letter Carriers 241,303 and the Mail Handlers 61,083.

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Unions end rotating strikes by British Columbia nurses

Unions representing nurses in British Columbia have ended their campaign of rotating strikes and ordered their members back to work without any concrete agreement. The union says it is awaiting a proposal on wages and overtime issues from a

provincially appointed mediator. If union members reject the proposal, due Tuesday, the walkouts could resume.

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Steelworkers end 32-month strike

United Steelworkers Local 6917 has reached a settlement to end the 32-month strike at industrial pump manufacturer S.A. Armstrong Ltd. near Toronto. During the strike, which began in April 1996, the company took advantage of changes to the Ontario Labour Relations Act to use scab labor and demand a return to work on their terms. Those workers who return to their jobs have been forced to take massive wage cuts, in some cases as much as \$3.00 an hour.

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Niagara public secondary school teachers reject tentative pact

Public secondary school teachers in District 22 Niagara have rejected a tentative agreement with the Niagara district school board for the second time. 'Teachers still have grave concerns over working conditions and the cuts to school programs,' stated Pam Constable, chairperson of the teachers' negotiating team. OSSTF District 22 Niagara represents approximately 1,000 public secondary school teachers in the Niagara region.

Teachers throughout Ontario have been involved in repeated struggles against the educational 'reform' measures initiated by the Harris government.

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[1 December 1998]



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