

The Americas

26 January 1999

Mexican government arrests leaders of teachers union

The Mexican government arrested members of the Mexican Teachers Union (CNTE) Local 9, including General Secretary Blanca Luna Becerril, January 1 for a protest demonstration in the Mexican Senate last November. The attorney general has charged them with kidnapping, robbery and riot, charges that carry maximum penalties of 50 years in prison. The teachers are being held without bail.

The November protest stemmed from the refusal by Tomas Vazquez Vigil, national leader of the SNTE, to recognize the new leadership elected to Local 9 in July 1998. The local was cut off from its share of treasury money and refused to process any of the local's union business. The CNTE is the Mexico City section of the national SNTE.

The protest was aimed at Senator Elba Esther Gordillo, the former head of the teachers union and believed to be the major power behind the resistance to recognizing Local 9's new leadership. A fight broke out between guards and teachers outside the Senate, and ultimately teachers turned it into an occupation of Senate offices with several senators held hostage.

The severe reaction by the PRI government is believed to be aimed at preventing the emergence of a leadership faction in the SNTE that is supportive of the opposition PRD led by Cuatemoc Cardenas. However the government's arrest of Local 9 leaders provoked widespread support in the working class, which sees in the attack on the teachers union as a continuation of the government's assault on education and living standards in general.

All three of Mexico's leading political parties supported the government assault on Local 9--the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN), and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The PRD, however, has shifted and is now calling for the dropping of charges.

Tentative deal between Northwest Airlines and IAM

Northwest Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) reached a tentative agreement January 23 for its 18,000 ground employees, including ticket agents, reservationists, clerks, baggage handlers and ramp equipment operators.

The agreement calls for an immediate 4 percent raise followed by raises every 14 months of 4 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent, as well as a 3.5 percent lump-sum retroactive payment. It is essentially the same wage package that IAM members soundly rejected last August when mechanics, outraged by the sellout, voted to leave the IAM and recertify with the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association.

The IAM has been without a contract for 28 months. Workers have not had a raise since 1991 and are still bitter over the concessions given to bail the airline out during the 1990s, which translated into huge stock options for executives and pay freezes for workers.

The IAM claims that it won gains in the area of work rules and other non-wage perks for employees, although complete details are not available. Northwest agreed to a 50 percent pension increase. Previously workers hired after 1996 were not covered by a job security clause. The new agreement provides this coverage for all those employed at the date of signing. Part-time workers are to receive health benefits and paid holidays. A vacation "borrowing" rule was also restored, allowing workers to transfer next year's vacation to the present. Forced overtime will continue, but the IAM claims it will be restricted. The IAM is also thought to have agreed to expanded use of part-time workers.

The IAM expects ratification votes to take place in mid to late February. Northwest was hit by a pilots strike last summer and still must negotiate contracts with 10,000 mechanics. Another 10,000 flight attendants are scheduled to resume negotiations

February 1.

Machinists union strikes Trane Co.

The International Association of Machinists Local 1296 set up picket lines outside the Trane Co. plant in Clarksville, Tennessee on January 18 after its 1,800 members voted overwhelming against a four-year contract. Trane is a division of American Standard and manufactures commercial air conditioners.

Contract issues were not revealed, but the 1,012 to 307 vote reflects great dissatisfaction by union members with the proposal, under conditions where the company posted \$3 billion in sales for 1997. "I think we were somewhat surprised with how [union members] reacted to the proposal," admitted Local 1296 business representative Rick Wallace. "The members are aware that Trane is doing very well and I think expectations were high."

No new negotiations are scheduled.

Boeing agrees to settle race-discrimination suit

Boeing Co., the world's largest aerospace company, agreed to pay \$15 million to settle three lawsuits, which charged the company harassed black employees and denied them promotions under conditions where they held the highest qualifications for job openings. The company also agreed, under a consent decree, to change its training and promotion practices.

The three suits were filed last year in federal court in Seattle. One of them was a class action lawsuit on behalf of Boeing's 12,900 black workers, out of a 228,000 work force at plants in Seattle, Philadelphia and other locations, charging a "racially hostile work environment" that included the use of slurs, crude graffiti and intimidation.

The settlement calls for 20,000 current and former employees at Boeing and subsidiaries such as McDonnell Douglas to share in payments totaling \$7.3 million. About half that money will go to 264 individuals specified in the suits, resulting in average payments of \$10,000 to \$30,000 with some as high as \$50,000. Another \$3.65 million will go toward improved training and selection of managers. Four million dollars will go to lawyers to cover fees and court costs.

Newly-unionized textile workers stage strike

The 1,300 workers employed by sock manufacturer Bas Iris at its two Montreal-area plants have gone on strike to win their first union contract. The workers,

virtually all of whom are recent immigrants to Canada, earn on average \$7.50 an hour or just 60 cents higher than the provincial minimum wage. The company has offered them wage increases of 20 cents, 15 cents and 10 cents in the respective years of a three-year contract. The Bas Iris workers joined the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees last July.

Militant protest against strikebreaking

More than a thousand striking hotel workers and their supporters rallied outside the Wheels Inn and Convention Centre in Chatham, Ontario, Saturday, January 23. The Inn, which is resisting the efforts of its 453 full-time and part-time employee to win a first union contract, has urged workers to break ranks with the strike and has hired scabs. Since the walkout began November 25, several picketers have been struck by vehicles driven by strikebreakers or management personnel.

At the height of Saturday's rally, which was organized by Canadian Auto Workers Local 127, some 100 demonstrators burst into the inn's bar, overturned tables, and shouted, "No more scabs." They subsequently obeyed police instructions to vacate the building and rejoined the rally.

Faculty strike Mount Allison University

Professors and librarians at New Brunswick's Mount Allison University launched their second strike in seven years January 22. They are demanding wage parity with faculty at other small Canadian universities. According to a recent survey by *Maclean's*, the Mount Allison faculty is the fourth lowest paid in the country.



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