

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Protests follow general strike in Ecuador

In the aftermath of last week's two-day general strike in Ecuador, the Patriotic Front, the coalition of trade unions, student, peasant and indigenous peoples' organizations which led the national walkout, has called for mass civil disobedience protests on Wednesday, March 17 to force President Jamil Mahuad to resign. The front intends to organize road blockades, hunger strikes and the takeover of banks. Calling Mahuad's IMF-backed economic measures a "coup de grace against all Ecuadorians," the front asked Congress to revoke Mahuad's seven-month term.

Striking taxi drivers also vowed to block highways in the capital city of Quito Monday to protest last week's gasoline price hike of up to 165 percent.

On March 10 and 11 thousands took to the streets to denounce the government and the ultra-right-wing co-government party, the Social Christian Party (PSC.) On the evening of March 11 Mahuad announced a series of emergency economic measures to eliminate the government's \$1.5 billion deficit, including an increase in gasoline prices and the Value Added Tax and a limit on bank withdrawals.

Mahuad had previously increased electricity costs by 400 percent, raised check cashing taxes, suspended pay raises for state workers, privatized state-owned enterprises and called a national bank holiday. In an attempt to defuse some of the popular reaction, Mahuad also raised the monthly poverty bonus from \$7.50 to \$11. But this bonus will only be granted to 100,000 people. Nearly 70 percent of Ecuador's 12 million people live in poverty.

During the two-day strike at least three protesters were killed and dozens more injured as police and military troops attacked demonstrations in Quito, Guayaquil and other cities. Police also arrested 324 people.

Independent truckers strike in Colombia

One hundred thirty-five thousand independent truck

owner-operators began an indefinite strike March 10 in Colombia against low fees and a government modernization program.

The strikers are demanding that the trucking companies stop violating a fee schedule agreed upon after a bitter strike a year ago. They also are rejecting an increase in road tolls and a modernization program that threatens to force thousands of small operators out of business, favoring the large companies.

Because Colombia lacks alternatives to truck transportation it is expected that the movement of thousands of tons of merchandise will be disrupted. If the strike lasts over a week Colombian cities will face food shortages.

Bolivians demand freedom for jailed teacher

Teachers, students and parents rallied in La Paz March 11 to demand freedom for Vilma Plata, leader of the Urban Teachers Union. Plata was arrested during the teachers strike in February and has yet to be released.

Freddy Hurtado, representative of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights in Bolivia, denounced the arrest as an illegal political victimization. According to Hurtado the government wanted to silence Plata and prevent her participation in other protests. Throughout the February strike, the government said it was involved in a "war against Trotskyists" in the leadership of the teachers union, whom they accused of carrying out political strikes.

Hurtado charged the Hugo Banzer government with using the case to impose a repressive labor penal code, which violates human rights. The Bolivian teachers strike began on February 5. The Banzer government was able to isolate the teachers and force them back to work on February 17, under the threat of mass firings.

Mexican students continue protests

Thousands of students shut down Mexico's main university March 11 in a protest against tuition increases at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In the largest demonstration thus far, students stopped traffic in the main avenues of Mexico City.

During the protests, which lasted all day long, many motorists honked to express their support for the students. Francisco Barnes, the president of UNAM, has proposed an increase in tuition to \$136 a semester, a fee out of reach for most working class and lower middle class students.

America West strike deadline approaches

America West Airlines and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) will meet March 17 in a final negotiating session just two days before the expiration of a 30-day cooling-off period.

The "supermediation" session comes at the request of the National Mediation Board to discuss a \$6 million salary gap between the demands of the union and management for 2,400 flight attendants. The AFA is seeking an increase from the present annual salary of \$21,072 up to an industry average \$32,724.

The AFA is looking for its first contract with America West. Negotiations have been dragging on since 1994. Flight attendants overwhelmingly defeated a tentative pact in October 1997. Talks resumed in March 1998 but broke off in January with an impasse and 30-day cooling-off period declared in February.

The AFA has made clear it will not call an indefinite strike of its full membership, but will order partial or limited walkouts. "If we don't get a fair agreement, we will strike," declared William McGlashen, president of Association of Flight Attendants Council 66. "We may strike all flights going east, or we may strike flights leaving from Las Vegas on a specific day. Management won't know, and the traveling public won't know." America West has threatened to shut down the airline if the AFA strikes.

Machinists ratify contract at Lockheed Martin

Members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) at Lockheed Martin plants in Marietta, Georgia and Palmdale, California voted to accept a three-year contract offer just hours before a March 9 strike deadline. Workers were prepared to walk off the job March 7 when the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service intervened to block a strike. The government agency said a "substantial interruption of commerce" would result if the IAM struck Lockheed, which works on the F-22 Stealth fighter jet and C-130J military cargo plane.

The 6,100 machinists overwhelmingly rejected the earlier contract on the grounds that the pension plan of \$40 per month per year of company service was insufficient. The company's contract proposal to reduce and consolidate job classifications by one-third was seen

as a direct threat to job security as well.

The new agreement dropped the consolidation of job classification proposal and raised the pension benefit formula to \$47 per month per year. The wage proposal remained the same as the last offer of 9 percent, to be implemented in three annual wage increases of 3 percent each.

Ottawa police attack protesting government workers

Ottawa police in riot gear used German shepherds and pepper spray to attack a picket line demonstration by federal employees in the nation's capital March 10. Two union members were arrested and one protester required 21 stitches after being bitten on the calf by a police dog, according to the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Some 14,000 federal blue-collar employees, including general laborers and tradesmen, hospital staff, fire fighters, ships crews, lighthouse keepers and heating and power workers, have been involved in rotating strikes across Canada for seven weeks. The workers, whose wages were frozen between 1991 and 1997, have rejected the Treasury Board's offer of 2.5 and 2 percent increases over two years.

Bell Canada union calls off scheduled strike

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), representing nearly 10,000 operators and technicians at Bell Canada, called off a scheduled strike last week after being instructed by the Canadian Industrial Relations Board to put the company's latest contract offer to its members for a vote. The union said its members would continue a work-to-rule campaign until after the vote, to take place over the next two to three weeks.

CEP officials had previously said that Bell's "final" contract offer would not be submitted to the membership. Instead, the union said it would strike unless Bell withdrew demands for concessions that include plans to transfer operators to an associate company, where wages will be cut by 40 percent.

Bell, a subsidiary of Montreal-based BCE Inc., said its offer includes retaining 900 of 2,300 operators, enhanced retirement packages, severance, and job offers for employees who join a new directory assistance company.



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