

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 March 1999

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to editor@wsws.org

Thousands oppose electric privatization in Mexico

Tens of thousands marched March 18 against the privatization of electric utilities in Mexico City. Three massive columns of workers and students converged in the Zocalo area of the Mexican capital. The protesters denounced Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, accusing him of serving foreign interests.

Among the protesters was a contingent of thousands of members of the 30,000-strong Mexican Electricians Union (SME). SME leader Rosendo Flores accused the government of setting the stage for mass layoffs of electrical workers.

On February 2 Zedillo introduced legislation that reforms the Mexican constitution and paves the way for the privatization of Mexico's electrical utilities.

Colombian truck drivers end nine-day strike

Independent owner-operators reached an inconclusive agreement March 18 with the Colombian government, ending a nine-day strike. The agreement, which was signed after the military took over the country's highways to allegedly guarantee fuel and food supplies to the major cities, commits the government to nothing more than conduct a four-month study on the number of trucks that will be allowed to operate. Until then, the truckers agree not to strike again.

One hundred and thirty-five thousand independent owner-operators struck to demand that trucking companies stop violating a fee schedule agreed upon after a bitter strike a year ago. They also opposed an increase in road tolls and a modernization program that threatens to force thousands of small operators out of business, favoring the large companies. The strike had stopped the movement of 40 percent of the country's coffee exports.

Colombian teachers strike for 24 hours

Two hundred and twenty thousand teachers struck in Colombia March 18 demanding payment of back wages. According to the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE), teachers in some areas are owed as much as 20 months' back pay.

The educators also protested against government plans to privatize public education, and legislation that gives the Education Ministry the right to transfer teachers to any region, including areas in which guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary

groups and the armed forces are fighting.

This is the second strike of teachers this year. In February teachers joined 500,000 state workers in a 24-hour strike against the government's economic policies.

Farmers protest in El Salvador

Thousands of farmers demonstrated in the streets of San Salvador March 18 demanding government aid to reconstruct the damage from Hurricane Mitch. The protesters were from many towns in the Salvadoran lowlands around Lempa River, which were most severely affected by the hurricane.

Mass protests in Santo Domingo

Street merchants blocked the streets of downtown Santo Domingo March 17 to protest attempts by the police to clear them off sidewalks. The demonstrators lit tires, braved tear gas and set up barricades, demanding that they be left alone. At the same time in the towns of Salcedo and San Francisco, northeast of Santo Domingo, three were killed and 20 wounded in the third day of rioting and protests. Residents are demanding public works projects and other social programs from the government.

Land seizures in Venezuela

Thousands of Venezuelan homeless are taking over buildings and lots in a wave of land invasions that is moving Venezuela to the brink of civil war. While Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez thus far has not ordered the use of the National Guard against the homeless, Venezuelan ranchers have formed right-wing military squads to drive people from their lands. In the state of Lara, paramilitary squads have operated for a year against the homeless workers and peasants.

The ranchers blame President Chavez for the land invasions, saying his references to social justice and poverty have raised the expectations of the poor. Chavez has said, "I will not rest until all human beings living in this country have housing, jobs and means with which to confront their lives." At the same time, the president has refused to impose a four-month moratorium against layoffs that the labor unions were requesting. Chavez has also insisted that local authorities prevent land invasions. In the state of Zulia the police expelled hundreds of Indians who had occupied vacant lands.

Uruguayans rally against unemployment and for the victims of dictatorship

The National Organization of Workers (CNT) organized a one-day strike March 17 to protest unemployment. The strikers also demanded that the government release information on the

fate of victims from the last military dictatorship. Official unemployment in Uruguay is 12 percent with 160,000 workers reported out of work. Another 340,000 are underemployed. All told, more than 500,000 out of the country's 1.3 million laborers have been buffeted by the economic crisis.

Flight attendant strike averted at America West Airlines

America West Airlines and union negotiators announced a tentative agreement shortly after a March 19 midnight deadline that would have released 2,300 flight attendants to strike.

"The tentative contract provides flight attendants with fair wages, a per diem and work rules that will improve our quality of life," declared Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) Local Council 66 President William McGlashen. The AFA had been demanding wage compensation equal to an average of the top 10 airlines. America West flight attendants earn a yearly \$23,800 at the top of their scale compared to flight attendants at Southwest Airlines who top out at \$41,200.

But the AFA backed off that demand and was instead arguing for a larger bonus under a five-year pact in order to conclude the talks before the expiration of a 30-day cooling-off period ordered by the National Mediation Board. "We have in good faith negotiated down from that," said McGlashen. The NMB presided over the last three-days of talks in an effort to conclude a contract. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater brought added pressure on negotiators to reach an agreement.

Details of the contract were not available. In fact, the contract was not completed. Union and company officials met again on March 20 to iron out contract language. "The process technically is still going on," said an AFA spokesperson. No date has been announced for a ratification vote by the rank and file.

The AFA did not propose to call a company-wide strike if a contract had not been reached. Instead it threatened partial unannounced strikes. America West countered that it would fire any flight attendants who took part in such a strike and possibly lock out all employees.

Flight attendants unionized in 1994, three years after America West went through a bankruptcy reorganization. One consequence of that period was a 10 percent pay cut foisted on flight attendants. In 1997 the ranks overwhelmingly rejected a contract approved by the both the company and union. In 1997 and 1998 America West posted record profits.

America West, based in Tempe, Arizona, is the nation's ninth largest airline with hubs in Phoenix, Las Vegas and Columbus, Ohio. It serves 53 domestic destinations and eight cities in Mexico and Canada. The company must still negotiate a contract with its 1,600 pilots.

Workers strike Hertz at Newark, New Jersey airport

Hertz Corporation's hourly workers at the Newark airport struck at midnight March 18 after rejecting a contract agreed to by the company and officials of Teamsters Local 723. The contract covering the rental car workers expired in November 1998. On February 1 Teamsters negotiators accepted company

proposals. But at the February 6 vote workers rejected the wage proposal, leading to last week's strike.

Hertz management was upset that the Teamsters bureaucracy failed to ram through the tentative proposal: "Our Newark Airport employees are the highest compensated car rental employees at Newark Airport, a fact known to Local 723, which represents employees of competing car rental companies at the airport.... Hertz historically has maintained positive relations with labor and the job action by Local 723, following the members' failure to ratify a contract that had been accepted by the Local's negotiating team, raises questions about the Local's intent and direction."

Teamsters strike Metex

Members of Teamsters Local 11 went on strike against the Edison and South Plainfield, New Jersey plants of Metex Corporation March 15 over pay issues. The five-year contract proposed no raise in the first year and 1 percent raises in each of the remaining four years. Metex is an automotive parts manufacturing subsidiary of United Capital Corporation and makes exhaust seals and airbag seals.

CBC and journalists' union reach tentative pact

Negotiators for 3,300 members of the Canadian Media Guild have reached a tentative contract settlement with the state-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. But the Guild leadership is holding off putting the proposed contract to a vote until the strike of 2,000 CBC technicians, members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP), is closer to a settlement.

The technicians, who are now entering their second month of strike action, have denounced the Guild leadership for leaving them out in the cold.

Under the agreement with the Guild, which was reached only hours before a strike deadline, CBC will give its journalists, announcers and researchers wage increases of 9 percent over three years. This is well below the 15 percent that the Guild had demanded. The deal also includes a major concession in overtime pay. Henceforth, it will be calculated on a monthly average, rather than by hours worked in a given week.

CBC also negotiated a tentative pact last week with 700 administrative workers, who are in a separate bargaining unit. For over a decade, the CBC has been slashing jobs and outsourcing production.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact