

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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US: Newport News shipyard workers walk out

More than 9,000 members of United Steelworkers Local 8888 walked out at the Newport News (Virginia) Shipbuilding yard Sunday at midnight in the first strike in two decades against the only producer of the US Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carriers.

The workers are striking over wages and pension issues. The USWA is asking for a \$3.59 per hour raise over three years. The highest paid mechanic at the shipyard currently makes \$14.53 an hour. Hourly workers last received a raise in 1993.

The yard is presently working on the aircraft carrier *Ronald Reagan* and is repairing the carriers *USS Nimitz* and the *USS Harry S. Truman*. With 17,400 workers, the facility is the largest single private employer in Virginia. The company said it would continue operations using salaried employees.

Officials of the Teamsters union, whose members employed by UPS deliver vital parts, and the Communications Workers of America, who represent Bell Atlantic and Lucent Technologies workers, indicated their members would respect the Steelworkers' picket lines.

Washington state teachers launch walkouts

Teachers in the state of Washington have launched a series of one-day walkouts to protest the refusal of the governor and state legislature to meet their demand for a 15 percent across-the-board pay increase.

The 67,000 members of the Washington Education Association, frustrated by the inaction of their union leadership, have taken matters into their own hands by calling walkouts and sick-outs, combined with teach-ins and picketing of the state capital at Olympia to press their demands. A statewide rally is slated for April 17. The teachers' job actions have received support from students, parents, substitute teachers, custodial and security personnel.

Seattle teachers averaged \$38,834 in 1997-98, while the rest of the state's teachers averaged \$80 lower. A teacher in the state of Washington with a bachelor's degree and no experience starts out at \$22,950.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction has produced research showing that 70 percent of the state's teaching corps has left the classroom since 1990. The figure includes teachers who have retired or moved into administrative or district positions, as well as those who quit.

Oregon bus drivers mount one-day strike

School bus drivers from the Corvallis school district in Oregon carried out a one-day strike last week to protest the slow progress

of contract talks between their union and Laidlaw Incorporated, which has the contract with the school district. Talks have dragged on for more than a year over several issues, including the union demand for an increase in starting pay to eight dollars an hour.

Canada: Newfoundland nurses forced back to work by strikebreaking law

Newfoundland's Liberal government rushed back-to-work legislation through the provincial legislature last week to force an end to a strike by 4,500 nurses. Under the legislation, the nurses, who walked off the job March 24, were ordered to return to work by April 2 or face fines of up to \$1,000 per day.

The nurses were seeking a 17 percent pay increase and a reduction in their workload, through an increase in the number of full-time nursing positions. Newfoundland's nurses are the lowest paid in all of Canada. Their starting wage is \$15.19 per hour and the maximum hourly rate, attainable after six years service, is \$19.18 per hour. In Alberta the starting rate is \$19.99 per hour and the maximum rate is \$24.11.

The strikebreaking legislation imposes a 39-month contract on the nurses, with a total wage increase of just 7 percent. The Newfoundland nurses, like virtually all public sector workers across Canada, have seen their real wages fall substantially during the 1990s as a result of wage freezes and wage cuts.

Technicians end strike against CBC

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 2,000 technicians ratified a new contract last weekend, ending a six-week strike against Canada's state-owned radio and television network. Under the new contract, the technicians will receive a 10 percent wage increase over 37 months. This includes a 3 percent increase retroactive to January 1, 3 percent this July, a further 3 percent pay raise in July 2000, and a 1 percent increase as the result of changes in job classifications. The technicians will also receive a \$1,000 lump sum payment, in lieu of a 1 percent pay increase retroactive to last July.

Members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, the CBC technicians originally asked for a 30 percent wage increase over three years. The CEP has declared the strike a victory although it failed to win any protection against the contracting out of work, the strikers' other chief demand. CBC has agreed, however, that if a temporary worker stays in the same job and location for more than 18 months the position will be declared permanent.

Bahamian telecommunications workers combat privatization

Workers at the Bahamas Telecommunications Corp (BaTelCo) walked off the job March 31 alleging that the government was deceiving them in negotiations over privatization of the company. Consultants have recommended reducing the work force of 2,100

to under 1,000.

About 100 BaTelCo workers struck in Nassau and rallied at the headquarters of the Bahamas Communications and Public Officers Union. The strike left the telecommunications company with only a skeleton crew. Union officials said the workers were angry because Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham had made an offer two days earlier on retirement packages, but had unilaterally withdrawn the proposal March 31. A week before 500 protesters tried to storm the Bahamian parliament, forcing police to bolt the doors. Workers attempted unsuccessfully to march on the tourist mecca Paradise Island March 26.

Eight undocumented Mexican immigrants die near San Diego

Eight undocumented workers died trying to enter the United States 40 miles east of San Diego. They were part of a group from Mexico that were overcome by a freak snowstorm in the hills of the area. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) rescued 59 others. Authorities from the Baja California Norte government in Mexico managed to evacuate another 25 from the area and are conducting an intensive search for 30 more people.

Southern California has been hit by unseasonably cold weather. The snowstorm struck the immigrants, who were apparently abandoned by their escorts, late Thursday night. None of the dead had warm clothes. The deceased and those who survived had been on foot for several days.

So far this year 29 people have died crossing the Mexico-California border. Last year a record 141 perished, mostly by drowning. Immigrant rights advocates blame US repression of undocumented immigrants in the vicinity of San Diego. This has forced border-crossers further east, where conditions are much more dangerous.

Thousands repudiate Mexican governor

The newly elected governor of the state of Guerrero was sworn in while 4,000 people protested on the streets. The ceremony site took on the appearance of a war zone as helicopters and 2,000 riot police blocked the march of protesters to the hotel in Chilpancingo where Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) member Rene Juarez took office.

On February 7 Juarez won an election by a narrow margin over the candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Felix Salgado. PRD supporters allege that vote buying and the manipulation of non-Spanish speaking Indian voters tainted that election. The PRD also points out that many of its party workers have been killed under circumstances that point to possible PRI involvement, including Salgado's campaign manager, Aurelio Penaloza. One of the guerrilla groups that operate in this impoverished state declared that if Juarez took power, it meant a declaration of war.

For his part, Juarez named three former guerrilla leaders to his cabinet, including Heriberto Noriega, well known for having fought with legendary guerrilla leader Lucio Cabanas in the 1970s. The appointments were seen by observers as an attempt to blunt opposition.

Workers shut down Chilean ports

Five thousand dock workers shut down Chile's ports for several days last week demanding protection against privatization plans.

On Tuesday 3,500 workers shut down the main ports of San Antonio and Valparaiso, in the central part of the country, and Iquique and Tocopilla in the north. Forty workers were arrested on Wednesday in street protests. On Thursday, workers in the northern ports of Arica and Coquimbo and in the southern port of Talcahuano joined the strike. On the same day dockers' union leaders acceded to pleas from Interior Minister Raul Troncoso and President Eduardo Frei for a suspension of the strike while talks took place. However, union leader Walter Astorga said that if there were no resolution on Monday, the strike would resume on Tuesday.

Chilean ports are currently at the height of the fruit-exporting season. The stoppage affected 70 percent of exports and imports and caused more than a million dollars in losses in fruit and copper exports. Much of the fruit spoiled on the docks.

The workers acted in expectation that the privatizations will mean the destruction of many jobs. They are demanding retraining facilities, increased severance pay and an early retirement program.

Colombian guerrilla offensive

Electricity is being rationed in the cities of Cartagena and Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast of Colombia due to increased attacks from guerrilla forces in the Antioquia department of northwest Colombia.

Guerrilla forces belonging to the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) dynamited 10 high-tension towers and one of the country's main pipelines. This was the twenty-seventh attack on the same pipeline this year.

Another guerrilla group, the People's Liberation Army (ELP), set up roadblocks on a northern highway, allegedly to rob and kidnap tourists en route to the above-mentioned Caribbean resorts.

Landless peasants occupy 15 ranches in Brazil

More than 2,800 peasant families commemorated Easter week by occupying 15 ranches in northeastern Brazil. The ranches occupy 12,000 hectares of land. The families all belong to the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST). The farmers intend to pressure the Brazilian government to deed them land in the Alagoas state of northern Brazil.

MST leaders deliberately chose the week before Easter to avoid bloodshed. Armed guards employed by the landlords were away and the courts were in recess.

Reginaldo Pacheco, MST leader, denounced the government for cutting the budget under orders from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), thus lowering the available funds for each family land grant from \$9,800 to \$2,890.

Eighty-eight percent of arable lands in Brazil are in the hands of the top 20 percent of farm families, while the lowest 40 percent of farmers barely own 1 percent of the rest. There are 5 million rural families with no land at all.



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