

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

## Strikes continue in Ecuador

The professors' union threatened to continue a two-month-long strike this week as hospital workers announced that their walkout, which began last March, would also continue. The Patriotic Front, a coalition of trade unions, farmers and Indian groups, called for protest and marches this Thursday against the policies of President Jamil Mahuad.

In addition, business associations in Guayaquil, Ecuador's economic and industrial center, declared that they will have a 24-hour lockout next Thursday against the economic policies of the Mahuad government. The Guayaquil bosses have been critical of Mahuad's plan to reduce the government deficit from 6.5 percent to 3.5 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

Once Congress approves these fiscal measures, Mahuad plans to make a three-year austerity agreement with the International Monetary Fund in June. Mahuad's proposal includes eliminating tax exemptions, new taxes on property, vehicles and corporations. Over the last few months, the country has been hit by repeated strikes against IMF-backed austerity demands.

## Colombian teachers strike

Three hundred thousand Colombian teachers are on strike against the privatization of public schools and the lack of funding for public schools. Tarcisio Mora, president of the Colombian Educators Federation (Fedode), said, "There is no money in the government budget to build more schools, to fund educational research or to pay teachers."

The State Workers Federation also announced that other state workers would join the teachers on Wednesday to support their action and protest the government's economic policies. Public education in Colombia mainly serves the poor. There are 6 million students in Colombia's public schools.

## Construction workers protest in Peru

More than 1,000 construction workers fought police in downtown Lima April 13, demanding jobs and wage increases. They are also demanding the rollback of fees for public services and the restitution of their union rights.

Five workers were arrested, including a leader of the Federation of Construction Workers. Mario Human, the union's secretary-general, said that out of 300,000 construction workers, only 100,000 are presently working. He also declared that the union would participate in strikes on April 28 being organized by several Peruvian unions.

## Honduran high school teachers strike

Last Thursday 12,000 Honduran high school teachers launched a 48-hour strike. They demanded pay increases beyond the 19 percent already granted by the government. The teachers say that even with the increase they are not earning a living wage. They also demanded

the reconstruction of the 2,800 schools destroyed by Hurricane Mitch .

## Sick-out hits Alaska Airlines

Alaska Airlines canceled 26 West Coast flights Friday after large numbers of ticket agents and baggage handlers called in sick. Because of the job action, Alaska scrapped talks that were scheduled Friday with a ticket agents' union. The company denounced the incident as an illegal job action, and said a sick-out would violate contracts with the Seattle-based airline.

A spokeswoman for the International Association of Machinists Air Transport Workers District 143 in Minneapolis said the union does not condone a sick-out. "We weren't aware this was going to happen--it's a grassroots action," said the union's Mary Beth Christensen. "It would have an adverse effect on the negotiation process. We're trying to go through the process as it's supposed to be." She said talks with baggage handlers began in December 1996 and are now under way in Washington, DC. Talks with ticket agents began last November.

The day before, a federal judge in Dallas fined the Allied Pilots Association \$45 million for ignoring a court order to end a sick-out that led to the cancellation of more than 6,700 American Airlines flights in February.

## Steelworkers strike navy shipbuilder in Newport News, Virginia

More than 9,000 steelworkers are continuing their strike, begun April 5, at Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia, one of the major construction and maintenance facilities for the US Navy. Local 8888 of the United Steelworkers of America represents 9,200 hourly workers out of the yard's total 17,400 employees. The union wants an across-the-board hourly pay increase of \$3.95 over three years.

## Tentative agreement in Oregon teachers strike

Negotiators for the Oregon Education Association and the Fern Ridge School Board reached a tentative agreement April 16 that could bring the week-old strike by the district's 118 teachers to an end. The strike was called to demand "just cause" contract language to protect teachers from unwarranted dismissal. The proposed settlement provides teachers the right to an arbitrator for unjust firings, but does not provide it in cases where teachers believe they have been unjustly disciplined.

Forty percent of the district's 2,000 students boycotted classes taught by replacement teachers to demonstrate their support for striking instructors. The school board hired more than 70 replacement teachers and a contingent of security guards. Fences were constructed and video surveillance equipment set up to further intimidate teachers.

The Fern Ridge strike is only the second school strike in Oregon over a nine-year period. However similar confrontations could erupt throughout Oregon as the first contract talks are getting under way since the state legislature eliminated tenure for schoolteachers.

## Illinois grocery warehouse closed after one-week strike

The Fleming Companies closed its East Peoria, Illinois grocery warehouse after a seven-day strike by union workers. Some 50 warehouse workers struck the facility April 7 in a dispute over wages

and pension benefits. One day later another 20 truck drivers joined picket lines. The East Peoria warehouse, which supplied about 100 central Illinois grocery stores, is the eighth warehouse that Fleming has closed this year. In addition to union drivers and warehouse workers, another 50 nonunion employees will lose their jobs as a result of the closing.

### **Mass transit strike hits Toronto**

More than 7,800 drivers, mechanics and ticket collectors went on strike midnight Sunday over wages and overtime against the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC). Workers of Local 113 of the Amalgamated Transit Union voted 78 percent in favor of strike action on Saturday against the TTC's "final offer."

The union originally sought a 16 percent wage hike over two years, but has said it would settle for 3 percent a year. The TTC is currently offering 2 percent. Transit workers in Toronto have suffered one concession contract after another over the past decade and in the past seven years have received just one pay increase of 1 percent. The union, which has been in a legal strike position since April 9, continued negotiations until last Wednesday when the TTC negotiators invoked a seldom used government regulation, compelling the membership to vote on the tabled offer before a strike could be called.

The strike has crippled the greater Toronto area, affecting over 800,000 riders a day and bringing an additional 500,000 cars onto city streets. The union has already opened the door for a quick end to the strike, saying that the "broader public interest" could override the interests of its members and the intransigence of the TTC.

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman has insisted that any pay increase must be financed by a fare hike rather than a raise in taxes. The union has said that, with Toronto transit having the lowest government funding per capita of any city in North America, the provincial government has to come up with more money. Talks remain stalled, and the Tory move for an early recall of the provincial legislature to pass back-to-work legislation has been delayed by maneuvers of the New Democratic Party.

### **Union scuttles Saskatchewan nurses strike**

The Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN) have asked their members to return to work after a "memorandum of understanding" to renew talks was reached with the provincial government Sunday morning. The deal is not a collective agreement and does not contain specifics to address key issues such as understaffing which have steered the nurses in their fight.

In ending the 10-day-old strike, the union leadership has achieved what the government was unable to do. The 8,400 striking nurses had defied two laws passed by the NDP government to force them back to work. SUN President Rosalee Longmoore announced that the agreement reached with the government was conditional on removing "the impediments of Bill 23," the law which imposes a three-year contract and ordered nurses back to work. The agreement as it stands, however, falls well short of the union's demand of a 22 percent wage increase, giving nurses only 6 percent over three years, equal to the offer made at the onset of talks, plus 7.7 percent in benefits.

While the government did add some money to the negotiations as an inducement to end the strike, it is clearly well short of what is required to revive a crippled healthcare system. Responding to concerns over a labor backlash, NDP (New Democratic Party) Premier Roy Romanow said, "I did not take an oath to the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour.... For my part, I am absolutely at ease with my soul, conscience and mind."

In addition to the sellout over wages, the arrangement reached between union leaders and the Romanow government does not protect the union from heavy fines imposed under back-to-work court injunctions. Nurses began to return to work Sunday, but it is unclear whether they will all abide by the deal struck by their leadership.

### **Sit-in at Ontario auto parts plant**

As the result of a plant occupation, the multinational auto parts manufacturer Johnson Controls has abandoned a plan to lay off up to 200 workers at its Stratford, Ontario trim plant and shift their work to Mexico.

Some 30 members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 1325 staged the sit-down strike, locking out plant managers, for 23 and a half hours, beginning last Thursday morning. A CAW picket line outside the plant was joined by striking Bell Canada workers, teachers, members of the United Steelworkers and other trade unionists.

The principal factor in the company's climb down was the occupation's potential impact on production at Chrysler's Bramalea, Ontario car assembly plant. The Chrysler plant relies on just-in-time delivery of seat covers from Johnson Control's Stratford plant. By Thursday afternoon, Chrysler officials were warning that in a few hours they would have to begin producing cars without seats, and, because of limited space for storing unfinished vehicles, might soon have to cease making cars altogether.

Hemi Mitic, assistant to CAW President Buzz Hargove, told the *World Socialist Web Site* the union was in regular contact with Chrysler throughout the sit-in. Mitic insisted the union had made no concessions in exchange for Johnson Control's decision to rescind 57 layoff notices that were to take effect last Friday. The company has also guaranteed that the Stratford plant will be the sole supplier of trim for Chrysler's Bramalea plant. However, the back-to-work agreement commits Johnson Control to rehire only 75 laid-off CAW members for every 100 workers who retire or quit, meaning the work force could be subjected to speedup. In the past five years, Johnson Control has slashed the work force at its Stratford plant from 1,200 to 600.



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