

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Flight attendants heckle Northwest Airlines executive**

Northwest Airlines chairman Gary Wilson walked off the stage 20 minutes into the company's annual meeting amid heckling from flight attendants who have gone without a contract for two and a half years and have not seen substantial wage increases in ten years.

The meeting, held in Manhattan's Equitable Life Building, was attended by members of the Teamsters union representing NWA's 11,000 flight attendants, who asked why they are the lowest paid among the nation's leading airlines with annual salaries in the "teens" while the likes of former executive Michael Levine exercised stock options netting him \$11 million in 1998.

Wilson declared the questions out of order and threatened to have attendants removed from the auditorium before stomping out amid a shower of catcalls and epithets. Among members of the NWA board of directors who followed Wilson to the door was former Vice President Walter Mondale.

Flight attendant Jeanann Strunk told the media, "I've worked at the company for 30 years and they just walked out on us. I have worked for Northwest all those years and I still can't afford to retire. I don't know how they can sleep at night." Flight attendants pointed out that some of the lower-paid members of their ranks have been forced to utilize food stamps to make ends meet. Mediated talks between NWA and the Teamsters union are scheduled to resume April 28.

## **Minnesota brewery workers strike**

Seventy brewery workers set up picket lines at the Minnesota Brewing Company in St. Paul April 24 after more than two-thirds of the union rejected a concessionary contract proposal. The company--with \$5.68 million in losses over the last two years--reduced

vacations, curtailed overtime and required workers for the first time to pay deductibles and other healthcare costs. In addition, the three-year contract offered an immediate 2.2 percent increase, a freeze in year two, and a 22 cent an hour increase in the final year.

The brewery workers, members of the International Association of Machinists, Lodge #77, have not received a wage increase in five years. Presently workers make \$14.18 an hour at top scale. The IAM is one of seven unions at the plant and comprises the majority of the 100 workers employed there.

The brewery, which makes Grain Belt Premium, Pig's Eye, Yellow Belly and other malt beverages, has seen its Minnesota market share fall from 3.3 percent to 2.9 percent. To avert financial collapse the company is pursuing a \$20 million deal to produce ethanol under a state subsidy.

## **Mississippi bus drivers call one-day strike**

The Covington County school board acknowledged the demands by school bus drivers for a pay increase after 30 of the district's bus drivers called a one-day strike April 19. The strike was discontinued after the board promised to consider the union's pay proposal. The bus drivers launched the action to protest the lack of progress in contract talks.

## **Saskatchewan Nurses threaten renewed strike action**

Following the return to work last week by Saskatchewan's 8,400 nurses after an 11-day strike, the deal reached between the Saskatchewan Nurses Union and the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government is coming apart. At their convention last Thursday, nurses demanded to go back on strike when it became clear that government negotiators were not prepared to meet the terms of the memorandum of agreement which returned them to work.

The memorandum had stated that the recommendations of a workplace assessment committee would be binding. But the government

agency in charge of negotiations, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO), has reneged on that promise. The union has also taken issue with seniority provisions, saying that the agreement had been broken with SAHO trying to postpone that clause until 2001.

The original agreement gave no assurances that the issues of understaffing and working conditions would be met and nurses are still threatened with court action for their illegal strike. The Saskatchewan Nurses Union has called a weekend truce, despite overwhelming anger on the part of nurses to the turn in events. Talks had broken off Thursday with at least 45 other items still in dispute.

### **Alberta Tories preempt teachers strike**

With 6,600 teachers poised to strike Calgary public schools on Monday, the provincial Conservative government invoked a seldom used measure of the labor code requiring an inquiry be concluded before a strike could be called. That would effectively postpone a strike until near the end of the school year.

Teachers were set to strike today after rejecting the last offer from the school board. Teachers are asking for a 7 percent wage increase over two years and have been offered 10 percent over three years by the board. The main issue for teachers aside from wages is the proposed elimination of teacher-student ratios, which would lead to layoffs and larger classes.



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