

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 May 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

Transit strike in Nicaragua

Violence erupted after two days of a truckers' strike in Managua April 29. The government of Arnaldo Aleman has been paralyzed, while people, lacking essential supplies, have looted stores.

When negotiations broke down on April 28, 10,000 trucks blocked highways across the country. Unknown assailants launched mortar fire against the offices of the Agency for International Development.

Classes have also been suspended until this week while the army takes over key locations of the capital. A presidential state of siege decree is expected this week. The transport workers have declared an indefinite strike. The strikers are demanding that the government lower the price of fuel, promise not to deregulate their industry and liberalize the importation of new equipment.

Police attack striking peasants in Colombia

Thirty peasants were wounded and seventeen are missing after a police attack in the Department of Huila on April 30. Thirty thousand peasants have been on strike in this department since last week against the government's agricultural policies.

Another group of peasants blocked the Pan-American Highway and other roads south of Bogota. A series of barricades blocked these highways down to the Ecuador border. Teachers and students joined the peasant roadblocks.

Nationally, protests continued throughout the country. In Cartagena, bus drivers blocked all the roads leading to the city center with their buses and in Riohacha a mass demonstration of workers paralyzed the city.

In Bogota the streets, empty from the transport workers strike, are periodically inundated by protests of teachers, health workers and state employees.

Mexican student strike continues

Mexican students at the National Autonomous Metropolitan University (UNAM) campus in Mexico

City, on strike since April 20, are getting increasing support from many of Mexico's workers, students and peasants. The students have occupied every department in this mammoth campus of 100 hectares. Students are demanding that the fee increases be rescinded, saying they are contrary to the Mexican Constitution.

Retired workers protest privatization of Social Security in Ecuador

The Federation of Ecuadorian Retirees mobilized its members last week to protest government plans to privatize Social Security. Their protest was mainly composed of elderly citizens and intended to petition President Jamil Mahumad to reactivate Ecuador's Social Security Institute. They were prevented from doing so by a tear gas assault by police. Several elderly protesters had to be treated for asphyxia.

Ecuador's social and union movements denounced the attack. Luis Villacis, a Popular Front leader, declared that this was a cowardly attack and that the government will no longer be allowed to use these dictatorial methods. Presently, the government confronts an indefinite strike of health and transport workers.

The Federation of Retirees indicated last week that the government has allowed healthcare for the elderly to deteriorate by not hiring new Social Security doctors to replace those that leave the system. It also pointed out that the government owes the Social Security Institute more than \$6 billion. Mahumad had ignored that debt, while paying similar sums to international banks.

Ecuador, a nation of 12 million people with an unemployment rate of 70 percent, presently owes \$16 billion to foreign banks. Forty-two percent of its budget is dedicated to paying interests on that debt.

Striking Virginia shipyard workers rally

Between 1,000 and 2,000 striking shipyard workers, members of the United Steelworkers, marched and rallied in front of the Newport News Shipbuilding executive headquarters April 28, while local and state police stationed themselves on the periphery.

Virginia State AFL-CIO President Daniel LeBlanc

referred to the Virginia shipyard, which performs military contracts for the Navy, as a "plantation." Richard Davis, USW vice president, pointed out that Newport News Shipbuilding CEO Bill Fricks had a \$525,000 salary. If workers had received the same rate of pay increases as Frick's the average pay would be \$35 an hour, he said.

Newport News workers make from \$8 to \$14.50 an hour. They rejected the company's four-year \$2 pay increase and demanded an across-the-board increase of \$3.95 an hour, plus the restoration of holiday and vacation time surrendered by the USW in the previous four-year contract. When talks broke down the shipyard's 9,200 hourly workers went on strike April 5.

Conflict has developed between the strikers and 9,000 salaried workers who continue to operate the shipyard along with a small percentage of defectors from the union ranks. The USW leadership's response has been to file a federal complaint alleging the company has illegally photographed strikers on the picket line.

Strikers also began to receive their first strike checks from the USW. Strike pay will be \$100 a week over the next three weeks and \$115 a week thereafter. The USW admits that workers are already feeling pressure from mortgage companies, banks and landlords.

American pilots union revises position on sick-out

The Allied Pilots Association conceded in US District Court April 28 to label its conflict with American Airlines a "minor" dispute as it seeks to maneuver against a \$45 million fine for a February sick-out by pilots.

The decision undercuts the APA's original position that declared the sick-out a legal response to American Airlines' violation of the contract last December. American refused to immediately bring pilots from newly acquired Reno Air to the same wage and benefit scale as American pilots, insisting it would not equalize pay until October 1999. American pilots, angered by the company's decision, launched a sick-out that led to the cancellation of nearly 6,700 flights and cost the company millions of dollars.

The union claims its climb-down over the sick-out does not admit to any violations of law or contract, hopefully paving a way for some relief from the suit. The APA also agreed to a permanent injunction that bars the union or its members from any future job actions--whether a strike, sick-out or slowdown--over the Reno merger.

The fine was levied by federal judge Joe Kendall in a blatantly pro-company decision. Kendall named three defendants in the \$45 million suit--the APA and each of its two top officers--but did not decide how the fine would

be divided among the three parties.

Tentative contract in Indiana Head Start bus drivers strike

Bus drivers and monitors for 1,100 Head Start students in Indiana's Marion and Hamilton Counties reached a tentative agreement that may end the three-week strike. Union workers launched their action to protest unfair layoffs, poor wages and unsafe driving conditions.

Minnesota roofers set to strike

Some 700 union roofers rejected the final offer from commercial roofing companies April 30, paving the way for a strike in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. Among other issues workers are demanding a reduction of the workday from ten hours to eight.

A strike would affect construction on schools and other commercial sites. Most major Minneapolis and St. Paul downtown sites will continue working due to no-strike, no-lockout agreements.

Contracts for commercial and residential sheet metal workers, plumbers and pipe fitters also expired and could lead to strikes votes by May 3.

It has been more than 15 years since contracts in the Twin Cities building trades have been rejected. Currently, the industry is going through a boom and is hindered by a labor shortage.

Bell Canada strikers hold mass rallies

Hundreds of striking Bell Canada operators and technicians gathered from across eastern Canada to demonstrate at the shareholders meeting of Bell's parent company, Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) in Hull, Quebec last week. Nine thousand five hundred technicians and operators, members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, have been on strike since April 9 over threatened mass layoffs and wage cuts.

Bell has amended its plans to lay off all 2,300 of its operators with the sell-off of its operator services division, saying it will retain 900 of the jobs within the company. But wages for these jobs will be slashed by as much as 50 percent from the current \$20 an hour.



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