

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 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

Guyana police attack strikers

Police in Guyana attacked the three-week-old public employee strike. As a result, 24 Trade Union Congress unions joined the strike. On Tuesday, May 18 police bullets wounded 17 workers, resulting in widespread outrage among all large sections of the working class. The public workers have been demanding a 40 percent wage increase, while the government has declared that the International Monetary Fund will not allow more than a 4.5 percent raise.

The police attack changed the character of the strike. Since the shootings, all schools are closed and workers are confronting the police tear gas with rocks and sticks. The police justify the shootings, claiming that the strikers were interfering with customs agents when the attack occurred.

Electrical workers protest in Mexico

Electrical workers marched in Mexico City to protest the privatization of electrical utilities. The march brought together workers from several states. The marchers rallied at the central square and protested the proposed change in the Mexican Constitution that will permit the state to sell its electric utilities. Workers also protested the "interminable" drop in their wages' buying power. They attacked the Zedillo government's economic policies and called for the defense of their past gains.

Strikers shut down Mississippi shipyard

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 733 struck Ingalls Shipbuilding of Pascagoula, Mississippi May 19, joining the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 1133 on the picket line. Eleven out of the thirteen unions representing 8,000 shipyard workers rejected Ingalls' offer and demanded greater pay raises and bonuses. The non-striking unions had offered to continue working, but hundreds of their members have refused to cross the IAM's picket lines since May 17, resulting in a virtual shutdown of the Litton

Industries division, which builds Navy destroyers.

Ingalls offered \$1.90 over three years while raising insurance costs from \$25 to \$65 a month. Ingalls is also seeking to consolidate craft job classifications that would require workers to perform more than one job without any further compensation in pay. Workers are calling for a \$3 across-the-board increase with no hike in insurance premiums or combination of crafts. "We are world-class shipbuilders and quality craftsmen, and we are getting Third World wages," declared striker Darwyn Langly. "Just because we are from the South doesn't mean we have to settle for less."

In the last 25 years Ingalls has suffered only one strike—a two-day work stoppage by the IAM that resulted in a 36-cent wage increase.

Meanwhile, at the request of a federal mediator, Newport News Shipbuilding and United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local 8888 will meet this week for the first time since a strike by 9,200 production and maintenance workers at the Virginia shipyard began seven weeks ago. There is no indication that management is prepared to back down from its final offer that was rejected by workers. But the USWA bureaucracy has hinted that it would accept the demand for healthcare give-backs in exchange for a larger pay raise.

California carpenters launch wildcat rebellion against union leadership

Union members of the Northern California Regional Council of Carpenters launched a wildcat strike May 20, shutting down construction sites including the San Francisco International Airport and the sports facility, Pac Bell Park.

The action was a direct protest against the union leadership's signing of an inferior five-year contract. More than two dozen union locals in 44 counties representing 16,000 workers struck. They charged that Council President John Casey and his hand-picked delegates agreed to a contract at a meeting which excluded representatives elected by the rank and file. Previously all carpenters voted on contract ratifications. Eighteen

months ago a new union mandate changed the ratification procedure.

The new contract provided a \$5 raise. "That's not enough to keep up with inflation," declared Bill Banuelos, a lather and organizer of the wildcat. "We're behind the sheet metal workers, the plumbers, everybody—we're on the bottom of the totem pole. We told Casey we wouldn't strike if we got a chance to revote on the contract, but he told us to shove off." Carpenters presently make under \$27 an hour while other tradesmen make as much as \$34 an hour.

Carpenters picketing at the airport construction site carried simple cardboard signs that read "More Money." They're calling for \$10 more an hour over the life of the new agreement, coffee breaks and every other Friday off.

San Francisco Airport spokesman Ron Wilson charged the mass picket of wildcatters was an "illegal assembly" and "not sanctioned by the unions at all. These workers are subject to being arrested. They're also subject to being fired by their employers."

Wilson claims the stoppage costs the airport project \$1 million daily, and that due to a no-strike agreement wildcatters would be subject to payment of damages. Union leaders who do not order members back to work would also be subject to similar penalties.

Pennsylvania gas workers strike over threat to pension funds

More than 500 gas workers, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), walked out after negotiations with Peoples Natural Gas of Greensburg, Pennsylvania failed to produce acceptable clauses governing job and pension security and successorship.

Peoples Natural Gas and its parent company Consolidated Natural Gas are possible targets of a takeover bid by Dominion Resources. Presently, Consolidated's pension fund is in good condition. The SEIU fears that Dominion, whose pension fund is underfunded by about \$32 million, will drain the pension funds of Peoples Gas and Consolidated. Further, without a successorship clause, the SEIU believes jobs will be wiped out under the merger.

Miners protest against pit closure and privatization

Hundreds of Cape Breton coal miners, their families and supporters marched across the Canso Causeway, which links the island to mainland Nova Scotia on Monday, May 24, tying up traffic for several hours. The miners are protesting against the federal government-owned Cape Breton Development Corporation's plans to close down one coal mine, eliminating more than 1,000 jobs, and

privatize what remains of Cape Breton's coal industry.

Bid to strip air traffic controllers of right to strike

Nav Canada, the agency that manages Canada's air traffic control system, has asked the Canada Industrial Relations Board to designate 1,750 of the 2,200 members of the Canadian Air Traffic Control Association "essential employees," thus legally stripping them of the right-to-strike.

Unless the government intervenes, the controllers, who have not had a wage increase since 1991, will be in a legal strike position next month. NavCan, which assumed control of Canada's air traffic system in 1996, and CATCA have been negotiating since October 1997. The nonprofit agency, which is controlled by the country's airports, is balking at the controllers' demand for a reduced workload. It has dismissed the controllers' complaints that overtime and a shortage of controllers are compromising safety and is actually seeking to lengthen the controllers' workweek.

"Right now, we have people who are being counseled to abandon the aircraft on their radar scopes to run to the bathroom," CATCA spokesman Fazal Bhimji told CBC News. "We don't think that's acceptable."

While the government has declined comment on how it would react to job action by controllers, a federal-appointed conciliator has warned Ottawa would swiftly intervene and might impose a new contract.

Alberta nurses threaten to strike

Alberta's 16,000 nurses are threatening to strike in defiance of provincial labor laws that outlaw such action. The United Nurses of Alberta is demanding 2,000 additional nurses be hired, to stem a healthcare crisis caused by draconian government spending cuts, and that nurses be given a 14 percent wage increase over two years. The provincial Tory government is offering a pay increase of just 5.5 percent spread over two years and has pledged to hire 1,000 additional "frontline" hospital staff, but won't say what proportion of these are to be nurses.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact