

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 June 1999

## Guatemalan workers fight Phillips-Van Heusen plant closing

Workers at Guatemala's only unionized *maquiladora*, Phillips-Van Heusen's *Camisas Modernas* plant, blocked the company from removing equipment from the plant last week. The *Camisas* workers had been picketing the plant 24 hours a day since December 11, when management closed the plant. On May 17 contract workers from the US attempted to remove machinery from the plant. They were forcefully stopped by the laid-off workers, who battled the police to defend their plant. The workers used chains and hammered boards across the plant's entrances to block entry as they chanted: "The blood of *Camisas Modernas* workers will be on the hands of PVH."

When the police declined the plant management's request that they storm the factory, US embassy and top PVH personnel intervened to temporarily halt the removal of equipment.

The *Camisas* workers are demanding that the plant be reopened and their union recognized. In the US, their cause is being publicized and supported by the Campaign for Labor Rights. <http://www.summersault.com/~agj/ctr/>

## Honduran peasants seize land from military

Dozens of farmers took back land that the military had occupied since the 1980s. The Aguacate Ranch, comprising over 1,000 hectares in the Department of Olancho, had been lent to the American Central Intelligence Agency. It was used as a staging area for the Nicaraguan Contras during the covert war conducted by the Reagan Administration during that decade. It is also suspected that the Honduran Army buried bodies of missing and killed Honduran opponents to the regime on that land.

Up until now the Honduran military had disregarded decisions by the National Agrarian Institute that the land be given to the peasant farmers. By occupying the land, the National Peasant Association of Honduras (ANCH) exercised their rights under the law, according to Benedicto Carcano, ANCH president. As soon as they took it the farmers began preparing the ranch for cultivation.

## Mexican professors support student strike

The Academic Assembly of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has decided to back the student strike at the country's largest university, located in Mexico City. The professors are demanding that they not be forced to teach off-campus. The assembly set May 31 as a day for a protest march in support of the students. The assembly is also contemplating backing the students' demand for the resignation of UNAM President Francisco Barnes, who has organized off-campus classes and exams to break the student strike. Students have been on strike for more than a month to protest the introduction of tuition at the university, which has never charged more than a symbolic fee of two US cents.

## Cordobazo remembered in Argentina

The Utility Workers Union (Sindicato de Luz y Fuerza), community organizations and students in the industrial city of Cordoba commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the massive protests that led to the collapse of the US-backed dictatorship. On May 29, 1969 the city was occupied by tens of thousands of students and workers to challenge the repression of the Onganía dictatorship. The city was held for 10 hours. This event, known as the *Cordobazo*, was followed by uprisings in other

cities and directly led to the collapse of the US-backed dictatorship and to the elections of 1972.

## Protests in Uruguay

Thousands marched and rallied in Paysandu to denounce the refusal of the government to take measures against the social and economic crisis gripping Uruguay. The rally brought together workers, students and farmers, as well as members of social, church and trade union organizations. There was an open microphone in which speaker after speaker denounced unemployment, repression of trade unions, the crisis in healthcare and education, and the collapse of agricultural prices. Paysandu is 400 kilometers from Montevideo, Uruguay's capital.

## Student protests in Chile

In response to the killing of a striking student in Arica, students launched three days of protests as additional universities joined the month-long student strike. Some 60,000 students are now involved, up from 44,000 last week. The protests took place less than a week before the election of Socialist Party candidate Ricardo Lagos to the ruling four-party coalition.

Daniel Menco Prieto, a 23-year-old working class student, was shot in the head and killed by police in Arica on Wednesday, May 19.

On May 27, 3,000 students marched in Santiago to demand the resignation of Education Minister Jose Pablo Arellano and more money for scholarships. The students are also demanding the resignation of Interior Secretary Guillermo Pickering, who has organized the repression of the students. Similar protests occurred in other cities.

Chile's per capita expenditures on education rose in the 1990s, reaching \$167 dollars in 1997. The country trailed Argentina, Uruguay and Panama (which spent \$334, \$185 and \$172 respectively) and was ahead of Brazil and Mexico (\$164 and \$153). The collapse of copper prices since then has contributed to cutbacks in social spending.

Compounding social tensions, a large contingent of Mapuche Indians are conducting a 24-day march to Santiago. In the last few weeks there have also been protests against the privatization of ports by dock workers in the main ports of Chile.

## Company rejects union concessions in Virginia shipyard strike

Newport News Shipbuilding representatives walked out of negotiations with the United Steelworkers (USW) after union officials cut their wage demand back by 25 cents. Declaring, "We're disappointed," the company declined to make a counteroffer at the May 24 meeting, as the two-month strike by 9,200 shipyard workers continues.

Steelworkers rejected the company's March 30 offer to raise the average \$13.50 wage by \$2.49 an hour over the course of a four-year agreement. The USW had been holding out for an across-the-board raise of \$3.95 an hour after having wages froze over the last six years.

The union also offered to lengthen the time between automatic promotions and lowered the proposed work shoes allowance. But the USW continues to maintain the pension proposal that calls for the company to pay \$900 a month after 30 years of service. Newport News is offering \$589 a month pension to those who retire at age 65 with 35 years of service. The present pension pays steelworkers \$254 a month after 30 years of service.

Newport News, which is the Navy's sole producer of nuclear-powered

aircraft carriers, takes in \$66 million dollars in profits for every carrier completed.

In a related development, Navy plans to oppose Litton Industries' unsolicited bid to purchase Newport News were leaked to the press. The Litton takeover proposal would reduce the number of companies competing to build most classes of Navy warships from three to two. Litton owns Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pasagoula, Mississippi, where workers are entering their second week on strike over wages, healthcare and company attempts to consolidate job classifications.

#### **Pennsylvania gas workers strike ends**

Gas workers ratified a new agreement 364 to 59 on May 26, bringing the week-old strike against People's Natural Gas to a conclusion. The new four-year agreement calls for a 13 percent pay hike, increases in shift premiums and meal allowances.

According to the Service Employees International Union, which represents the 500 members of the United Gas Workers Union Local 69, the agreement produced the first pension improvements in more than 35 years. However, it is not clear whether the union won a successorship clause that would protect jobs and pensions in the recently announced merger of Peoples Natural Gas with Dominion Resources. Dominion's pension fund is presently underfunded by \$32 million.

#### **Waste Management attempts to break Texas garbage truck strike**

Waste Management Inc. of Fort Worth, Texas, has begun to replace striking garbage truck drivers after workers walked off the job May 24 to protest low wages and discriminatory practices.

The company has hired 23 permanent replacements to augment some 39 workers who crossed picket lines. A Waste Management spokesman announced that in any future negotiations the company would further reduce wages or benefits.

A majority of drivers voted last December to unionize under the Teamsters in order to press for higher wages and end discrimination against Hispanics and African-American workers in promotions. Workers are also demanding the company give full-time status to about 50 temporary workers who help drivers collect garbage. Some of the temporary workers have as much as five years with the company.

#### **TWA makes final offer to machinists union**

Trans World Airlines presented their "best and final offer" May 28 to the International Association of Machinists (IAM) which represents 16,000 mechanics, ramp workers, reservation agents and flight attendants.

The union had previously rejected a company proposal that would have brought TWA's pay scale to 90 percent of the airline industry standard. The new agreement merely brings workers to 90 percent six months sooner than previous proposal. "There will be no better offer," declared a company spokesman.

The three-year agreement offers machinists an 18 percent raise, ramp workers 10 percent, reservations agents 14 percent and flight attendants 27 percent. Cash payments to be paid during the next three years between \$2,100 and \$5,000 are also being offered in an effort to entice workers to vote yes.

#### **Air traffic controllers strike looming**

Air traffic controllers across Canada will be in a legal strike position as early as mid-June, but they are threatening to walk out as early as next week. A walkout would shut down almost every flight throughout Canadian airspace.

On May 31 a conciliator delivered his report on the dispute between Nav Canada, the not-for-profit corporation that owns and operates Canada's civil air navigation systems, and the 2,200-member Canadian Air Traffic Control Association. Normally, both parties are in a legal strike/lockout position seven days after a conciliator's report is delivered. However, the Canada Industrial Relations Board has ordered that any job action be delayed until it determines the staffing levels required to accommodate emergency and humanitarian flights during a work stoppage.

The union has accepted NavCan's offer of wage increases ranging from 17 percent to 39 percent in a two-year deal. The outstanding issues involve a proposal by NavCan to lengthen the work week by two hours to 36.5 hours. The company also wants to institute a system of uneven, irregular shifts that the union says will increase stress and fatigue, reducing both public safety and quality of life for the controllers.

Air traffic controllers have been working without a new contract since December 31, 1997. Their last negotiated contract was signed in 1991, and their wages have been frozen since 1993.

#### **Air Canada flight attendants to vote on strike**

Air Canada flight attendants are preparing to take a strike vote after negotiations between the attendants' union and the airline broke down May 27. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents almost 5,000 flight attendants at the airline, has been in negotiations with Air Canada for eight months.

A CUPE spokesperson says the company has refused to move on key issues such as pensions and work rules and is continuing to demand other concessions. The strike vote will be held at membership meetings across the country between now and June 4.

A 13-day strike by Air Canada pilots last September dropped the carrier's 1998 operating income by \$250 million and its net income by \$150 million, turning what should have been a profit into a \$16 million net loss for the year.

#### **Strikebreaking threat against Alberta nurses**

The Alberta Medical Association has warned that as many as 1,500 hospital patients will be flown to US and other Canadian hospitals in the event of a nurses strike. In a letter to Alberta doctors, association President Dr. Rowland Nichol also warned that several hospitals in Edmonton and Calgary could close, with nurses and other staff consolidated at the remaining facilities.

The province's 18,000 nurses are in a strike position if mediation results in deadlock. Word of the airlift plans came as United Nurses of Alberta representatives were in talks with regional health authorities as the last of six mediation sessions wound up June 1. The union said management improved its wage offer but did not address other issues such as shift differentials, overtime and vacation pay.



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