

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 June 1999

## Peruvian students expose government repression

The Peruvian Student Federation denounced government attacks against student leaders who participated in a one-day general strike April 28, called by the Central Workers Union. At least one protester was wounded and 50 arrested in Lima during the strike, which was supported by student groups. Since then, students involved in the strike have been singled out for disciplinary measures by the police and university authorities, according to Yomar Melendez Rosas, president of the student federation.

## Mass protests in Argentina demand decent housing and jobs

Hundreds of poor families in Argentina's second largest city took over the Ministry of Social Development of the Province of Cordoba. The protesters demanded housing that the government has promised. Ministry employees responded to the protest with the promise of funds for 300 families. Not satisfied, the protesters demanded a meeting with the governor of the Province, and then ended their occupation of the government offices.

Graciela Palomeque, one of the leaders of the protest, said, "We are leaving unsatisfied and disgusted by the government's insensitivity to the pain and marginalization of thousands of families."

Argentina is undergoing an economic crisis as bad, or worse, than the *tequila crisis* of 1994. Gross Domestic Product that year dropped by 4 percent and official unemployment rose to 18.9 percent. Caritas, a Catholic charity, announced last week that poverty in Buenos Aires has increased by 63 percent.

Oblivious to this, the government of President Menem is adopting measures demanded by Wall Street to cut government expenditures. The deficit is to be reduced to 0.6 percent of GDP by 2001 and balanced by 2002.

Over 10,000 marchers in the city of Rio Tercero, 60 miles south of the City of Cordoba, marched on June 4 to demand justice and jobs. Students, members of neighborhood committees, and family members of the dead from an industrial explosion that took place four years ago led the silent march.

Rio Tercero was devastated on November 3, 1995, when a munitions plant exploded. The residents suspect that the plant was purposely blown up to hide evidence of illegal arm sales to Croatia and Ecuador. Essential repairs have yet to be completed and agreed upon compensation payments have yet to be made to the victims of the explosion.

## Salvadorean and Honduran protesters demand aid for hurricane victims

While President Francisco Flores was being sworn in on June 1, the National Police of El Salvador attacked a peaceful demonstration of victims of Hurricane Mitch. The protesters intended to petition Flores directly because they have received

little or no aid since Hurricane Mitch struck seven months ago. Protesters declared that the hurricane destroyed their homes, crops and animals, leaving them homeless. "We have no homes, no work, we are on the street," they said.

The Pulsar press agency reports that the hurricane revealed the total lack of preventive and relief measures in the case of catastrophes. The coming winter is expected to be worse than the last. It also reports that the government has all but lost interest in resolving the matter.

In neighboring Honduras representatives of 40 communities affected by Hurricane Mitch threatened to block roads if the government of President Carlos Flores does not repair flood control systems damaged by the hurricane.

In the northern city of La Lima, Santos Olivera, leader of the Federation of Neighborhood Committees, announced the blocking of the roads in that part of the country. La Lima, a city of 90,000, was very badly damaged by Mitch and resembles a ghost town.

## Protests re-ignite in Ecuador

A new privatization law about to be passed in Ecuador is provoking a new round of workers' protests. The law would give President Jamil Mahuad a virtual *carte blanche* to decide which industries to privatize.

On Tuesday, Indians and peasants marched to Congress, demanding that the law be rejected. On Wednesday, public health workers engaged in a two-hour national stoppage. They are demanding back pay. The health workers have not been paid for two months.

The Indians, peasants and health workers are threatening to increase their protests if the government proceeds with its privatization plans.

## Northwest flight attendants authorize strike

Northwest Airlines flight attendants voted by an overwhelming 8,686 to 49 margin June 5 to authorize the Teamsters union to call a strike if the next round of bargaining fails to produce an acceptable contract. Teamsters Local 2000, representing 11,000 flight attendants at Northwest, has been negotiating on and off for the last three years over pay, pensions and job security issues.

Flight attendants will be eligible to strike 30 days after National Mediation Board declares an impasse. Company and union officials resume negotiations June 8. Northwest flight attendants want parity pay and benefits with their coworkers at Delta Air Lines, whose contract is considered the best in the industry.

Earlier this decade, the flight attendants, along with other Northwest unions, accepted pay cuts and other concessions when the company claimed it was on the verge of bankruptcy. Since then Northwest has made over \$2 billion in profits and paid its executives huge salaries and bonuses, while balking on an

agreement with the flight attendants, whose contract expired in 1996. Under the hated “B” scale two-tier wage system many newer flight attendants earn less than \$15,000 a year.

### **Mississippi shipbuilding strike settled**

Some 6,500 workers of the Metal Trades Council representing the remaining striking unions at Ingalls Shipbuilding of Pascagoula, Mississippi, voted June 4 to accept the company's most recent offer. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 733 was the first of the striking unions to ratify an agreement on June 3. Local 733, which struck May 19, represents 1,200 of the 11,500 workers at the Litton-owned shipyard which builds destroyers for the US Navy.

The IBEW contract passed by a mere 50 votes revealing substantial dissatisfaction with the union's acceptance of a \$2.30 an hour wage increase offered in three steps over a four-year contract. While representing an increase over Ingalls' original offer of \$1.90 an hour, it falls short of the workers' demand for \$3.00 an hour. The contract also calls for \$10 annual increases in employee-paid health insurance premiums.

Two of thirteen unions accepted the initial contract offers of the company. The International Association of Machinists, an independent unit, was the first to strike Ingalls on May 17 in opposition to increases in healthcare costs and the consolidation of job classifications without compensation. The refusal of workers from other unions to cross IAM picket lines closed the shipyard and forced the Metal Trades Council to call their members out on strike.

As workers prepare to return to the job at Ingalls, Litton Industries won a bid to acquire Avondale Industries for \$529 million. The New Orleans-based shipyard employs 6,000 workers. Earlier, the Defense Department rejected Litton's bid of \$1.3 billion, as well as another bid from General Dynamics, for the strikebound Newport News Shipyard of Virginia on the grounds that acquisition by either company would reduce the builders of most classes of Navy warships from three to two. However, Litton has indicated it will continue its in its attempt to acquire Newport News.

### **Workers strike North Dakota potato processing plant**

Some 280 members of Teamsters Local 116 walked out on strike against JR Simplot of Grand Forks, North Dakota, June 2 after rejecting a three-year contract that would have doubled insurance premiums. Simplot, which runs a potato processing plant, offered workers a 3 percent wage increase. Workers had asked for up to 4 percent in wages. Workers say the increase in premiums will negate the wage increase in the company's proposal. Simplot produces 2 billion pounds of potatoes a year and supplies McDonald's restaurants with more than 50 percent of their French fries.

### **Farm cooperative retaliates against unionization**

Workers for Cenex/Harvest States in two southern Minnesota cities set up picket lines at grain elevators June 1 to protest the company's attempt to strip them of their present pensions. The company reaction came in response to the unionization by the Teamsters five months ago of weighers, loaders, barge hands, dump operators and probers. For the last four months the union has been seeking a contract their first contract. “They took the hard

line on us and basically forced these guys out,” said Larry Yoswa, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 792. Cenex/Harvest States is an agricultural cooperative that employs some 5,500 workers in 18 different states.

### **GM Oshawa plant hit by wildcat strike**

General Motors largest auto plant in Canada was shut down Friday afternoon when workers walked out in protest of the suspension of an employee who had refused to work in an area deemed unsafe. About 1,200 workers stopped work mid-morning and the plant was forced to close 30 minutes later.

Work resumed for the evening shift but was said to be off “to a rocky start,” with many workers not showing up for the shift. The action was in violation of the collective agreement and therefore illegal. It is unclear what the response of the CAW leadership has been to the walkout, which was apparently sparked within the rank and file.

### **Phone workers locked out in Manitoba**

Over 1,400 workers at Manitoba's telephone company were locked out last Friday with management claiming that emergency calls were being jeopardized. Workers affected include operators and customer service representatives organized under the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) union.

The lockout is the latest development in the dispute which has been building for several months with MTS Communications of Winnipeg. In April, 1,100 MTS technicians were locked out for 20 days before reaching an agreement. Since their contract expired last December, the CEP workers have given their union a strike mandate with almost 90 percent in favor, but the union has so far only undertaken work slowdowns to protest stalled contract talks.

### **Canadian actors vote to strike**

Last week members of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), the union representing 14,000 film and TV actors, voted by a 96 percent margin to support strike action.

Actors have said that they are being asked to take a 40 percent pay cut through reductions in up-front royalties, or prepayments. In response, actors have asked for pay equity with their American counterparts which producers claim would represent a 70 percent pay increase. Even if this were the case, it points to a huge disparity in an industry where wage inequities are notoriously far beyond the norm.

According to ACTRA a strike would begin in July unless a settlement is reached in contract negotiations with associations representing producers from English Canada, Quebec and the United States. A strike this summer by actors would shut down all film and television production in Canada—an estimated 45 productions—with the exception of British Columbia. There, the provincial actors guild, the Union of BC Performers, has negotiated a separate agreement with producers.



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