

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 June 1999

Venezuelan oil union calls off strike

Venezuela's main oil workers union late on Sunday called off a nationwide strike planned for Monday after the government announced a last-minute pay offer for oil sector workers. "There will be no strike," Carlos Ortega, head of Venezuela's largest oil union, said. "We're pleased but not satisfied," he said after Energy and Mines Minister Ali Rodriguez said state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) would award workers a merit pay increase of between 3 and 6 percent.

The threat of an oil strike in the world's third largest oil exporter had contributed to a recent firming of prices, despite the fact that PDVSA had said it could maintain its output at the current level of 2.7 million barrels per day for at least seven days if the walkout went ahead.

Unions announced the strike last week after PDVSA said it would not award a regular salary rise for merit this year due to budget constraints. Talks to resolve the dispute seemed to have broken down earlier on Sunday when PDVSA negotiators failed to show up for a planned meeting with union officials. But after a late night meeting with President Hugo Chavez in Miraflores presidential palace, Rodriguez announced the merit increase, which is smaller than last year's average rise of 8 percent.

Tentative agreement at TWA

Trans World Airlines and the International Association of Machinists arrived at a tentative agreement June 13 for 16,000 mechanics, flight attendants and other ground workers. Details will not be available until June 15. Voting will begin the following day. Reports indicate that the contract is a two-year agreement.

Twice during the 1990s TWA went to bankruptcy court. Both times airline workers' unions imposed wage and benefit cuts on their members. The company presented its "last, best offer" on May 28 and the IAM

ranks were preparing to reject the offer when the new agreement nullified the earlier proposal.

Teamsters sign agreement to prevent Northwest flight attendants walkout

The Teamsters and Northwest Airlines reached a tentative agreement June 10 for a five-year contract to cover 11,000 flight attendants. Complete details of the pact are not yet available. Flight attendants with 15 or more years seniority are slated to get a 14 percent raise over the life of the agreement, while those with less than 15 years are rumored to be receiving increases in the range of 20 to 25 percent.

There is no indication whether the hated two-tier wage system has been removed. Under the inferior "B" scale, younger flight attendants, including those classified as reserve or on-call attendants, have earned wages which barely lift them above the official poverty rate.

There will be an immediate 60 percent increase in pension benefits with an overall 80 percent increase over the life of the five-year pact. Currently Northwest flight attendants receive a meager \$35 per month per year retirement benefit. The new agreement raises that to \$51.

The flight attendants' union agreed to pay cuts during the 1993-96 period when Northwest tottered on the brink of bankruptcy. From 1993 to the present their wages have climbed only 3 percent, while the company has registered record profits. Starting yearly base pay at Northwest moves from about \$14,000 to \$18,000. A seven-year attendant will see their pay go from \$25,000 to \$28,000 during the life of the contract. It is estimated the contract ratification will require a month or more.

US Airways and IAM reach tentative pact

US Airways and the International Association of Machinists reached a tentative agreement June 6 after nearly four years of drawn-out negotiations. No details of the proposal have been made available. The IAM represents 7,000 US Airways mechanics and other

trades workers. The contract first came up for negotiations in October of 1995. Workers have been laboring under the old agreement.

New Jersey governor provokes strike vote by state workers

New Jersey state workers represented by the Communications Workers of America voted by 91 percent to authorize strike action if their requests for a significant pay increase and a freeze on healthcare costs are not met by the time their contract expires at the end of June. The high margin for shutting down the state system by the 27,000-member work force is attributed in part to New Jersey Governor Christine Whitman's call for the inclusion of a job-performance clause that would be used to determine layoffs.

Century Aluminum workers voting on tentative agreement

Mail-in ballots were scheduled to be counted June 11 to determine if United Steel Workers members at Century Aluminum's Ravenswood, West Virginia plant will strike. Company and USW officials announced that even if the tally reveals the 1,600 workers voted for a strike, workers were required to report to work on June 14. "The purpose is to avoid an inadvertent work stoppage by giving the union and the company an opportunity to meet and assess the situation to determine an appropriate course of action," said a company spokesperson.

A number of workers declared they would not ratify an agreement because of hikes in medical costs. Deductibles for individuals would be \$200 and \$400 for families. Above that employees would be required to pay 15 percent of medical costs up to \$1,500 for individuals and \$300 for families. The agreement would raise wages by \$1.40 an hour over the life of a four-year contract. Local USW officials have called for a no vote while the district office has declined to make public its position.

In the event of a strike the company has said it will not try to operate the plant as it did in the bitter 1990-92 strike that went on for 20 months.

Quebec, Alberta nurses disputes

Almost 48,000 nurses in Quebec are threatening to walk off the job Tuesday and Thursday after talks between the province and the Quebec Nurses Federation broke down on the weekend. The nurses are demanding a new contract with a 15 percent raise from

the provincial government. The nurses have been without a contract since last June.

Meanwhile union leaders representing Alberta's 17,000 nurses canceled a strike vote scheduled for June 14 even though talks between the nurses union and healthcare organizations have been put on hold. The nurses union reached a tentative two-year contract on Friday, but the deal fell apart when an impasse was reached over working conditions for 500 long-term care nurses.

Alberta's hospitals are returning to normal operations as it appears the province's nurses will remain on the job for at least the next week and a half. Some surgeries were postponed last week and management threatened to airlift patients to hospitals in the US if an agreement wasn't reached.



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