

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 June 1999

Guyana strikes continue

The government of Guyana is contemplating the possibility of declaring a national state of emergency in the face of a week-long general strike. On Friday, workers reacted furiously to unconfirmed reports that union leader Patrick Yarde had reached an agreement for less than the 40 percent wage increase that workers have demanded. Yarde denied that the agreement had taken place. There are reports that Yarde's house was stoned by 200 striking workers and that his life has been threatened.

Guyana's Defense Minister Roger Luncheon and Army Chief General Joseph, met with other government officials to study the imposition of a national emergency to break the strike.

Argentine public workers force removal of governor

Thousands of protesters camped out in the May 24 Plaza in Corrientes province celebrated the removal of the governor of the province on June 18. Corrientes has been rocked by mass protests and strikes against nonpayment of wages in the public sector.

Public workers are owed the December bonus (half-month pay) as well as the salaries for April and May. June wages will also not be paid. The crisis was precipitated when the legislature refused to extend Corrientes' \$1.4 billion debt. At last count, the province needs \$120 million to pay back wages and retirement checks. Last week the Menem government in Buenos Aires advanced a paltry \$6 million.

Menem sent 350 National Military Police to Corrientes on June 11 and is considering putting the entire province under federal control. Thousands of workers are braving cold temperatures and occupying the plaza around the clock. Striking teachers sparked the protests. There have been no classes in Corrientes for over two months. Last Thursday four people were wounded during massive protests.

Corrientes, one of the provinces that comprise the Argentine Mesopotamia, borders with Brazil and is one of the country's poorest provinces. Its main industry is rice cultivation and processing. Its official unemployment rate is 14 percent. Unofficially, unemployment is estimated at 20 percent. Public sector jobs have been traditionally used in Argentina as a buffer against high unemployment rates.

Venezuelan army occupies oil facility

Over 200 National Guardsmen took over Venezuela's largest oil facility, the San Jose refinery, to impose a labor agreement. Workers are demanding the rehiring of laid-off workers, back pay owed them and better safety conditions at the plant. The energy minister of Venezuela, Ali Rodriguez, declared that the military occupation was "to guarantee internal security." Last week, the oil unions called off a planned national strike and accepted a government wage offer.

Nicaragua protest against new squatters law

Squatters groups in Managua are protesting a new law requiring them to pay in 15 years for the land they are occupying. The squatters have declared themselves in "national rebellion" and promised to pay nothing, even if the police expel them from their homes. The new law affects more than a million people in Nicaragua. The squatters organizations had demanded that the law grant them the right to their homes. The outraged squatters protested before the legislature and declared that they would run Liberal Party politicians out of their neighborhoods if they campaigned there during the next elections. Others denounced the collusion between the legislators and landlords who will benefit from the new law.

Mexican students to continue strike

Delegates from 34 of the 38 departments of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) voted to continue the strike until the government meets their demands. They also voted to proceed with a mass mobilization to build a national "University Front in Defense of Public, Free, Democratic and Scientific Universities." A protest is scheduled for Wednesday, June 23, at the Olympic Stadium of UNAM. Students are demanding the resignation of Francisco Barnes, president of the UNAM, the elimination of automatic enrollment for the students of select high schools and of admissions tests administered by a private company.

New Jersey workers strike two Johnson & Johnson plants

Some 650 workers at two of Johnson & Johnson's New Jersey plants went on strike June 16 after contract talks failed to produce an agreement. Members of the Union of Needle trades, Industrial and Textile Employees Local 630 voted 344-159 to reject a five-year contract after the company insisted on maintaining a two-tier wage structure previously accepted by the union when J&J faced financial difficulty. Production workers are picketing the one production facility in Somerville and another in New Brunswick, which is also the location of the company's world headquarters. The two facilities produce products ranging from Band-Aids to surgical sutures.

Johnson & Johnson announced the struck plants would remain open and declined to say whether it would resume negotiations with the union. About 11,000 of the company's 93,000 worldwide work force are employed in New Jersey.

New York nursing home workers rally

Several hundred nursing home workers, patient advocates and members of the Uniondale, New York community rallied June 19, just three days before the Service Employees International Union Local 1115 is scheduled to strike 13 intercounty homes on Long Island.

The union has negotiated for eight months with the privately held Intercounty Health Facilities Association without achieving an acceptable contract. "The owners ... should be ashamed of themselves," said an official of Local 1115. "Mr. Miness, the owner of the Glengariff and Port Jefferson homes, paid himself more than \$1 million last year, yet he refuses to give a fair increase to employees who are barely making \$15,000 a year." A recent study of Long Island's for-profit homes found that the homes' quality of care is declining due to understaffing while owners show increasing profits.

Dayton Hudson denies responsibility for Saipan sweatshops

Dayton Hudson, the nation's fourth largest garment retailer, has declined responsibility for the horrific conditions facing workers in sweatshops on the US territorial island of Saipan who produce clothing for the Minneapolis-based company. Three lawsuits, claiming a total of \$1 billion on behalf of the garment workers, have accused Dayton Hudson and other clothing retailers of conspiring with Saipan factory owners to maintain abusive conditions, including indentured servitude, unsanitary living quarters and forced abortions to keeping female workers at their workstations.

"We didn't find any evidence of the egregious violations," said Dayton Hudson's corporate counsel James Hale. The company claims responsibility lies solely with Saipan factory owners and US government agencies. Their fact-findings, which they decline to make public, declare that foreign workers in Saipan have the choice to work or quit their jobs, therefore involuntary servitude cannot exist.

Saipan's status as a US territory allows it to save \$200 million a year by avoiding tariffs. The benefit to retailers is obvious: a typical polo shirt is shipped to the US mainland for \$6.50 and then sold in stores for \$65. The island's government controls immigration and the minimum wage, which is \$3.05 an hour.

Workers employed in the sweatshops come from Korea, China, Bangladesh, the Philippines and other Asian countries. They pay \$7,000 and commit themselves to work for three years to obtain what they think are high-paying US jobs. One whole year is usually necessary to pay off their labor contract. Some workers also sign "shadow contracts" which waive basic human rights such as marriage.

Workers labor 10 hours a day, 60 hours a week. There are no sick days, holidays or vacations. Workers who strive for bonuses find the quotas are raised once they reach them. Factories and barracks are surrounded by fences, often topped off with razor wire. Workers who protest their working conditions face deportation.

There is no air conditioning in plants that are stifling in the high Asian-Pacific heat and humidity, and workers often pass out. One company was cited by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for restricting the amount of water that employees can use for drinking, cooking, bathing and laundering. The island's industry is responsible for the biggest case of food poisoning ever investigated by OSHA.

One Chinese worker, asked what she missed most about her homeland after arriving at Saipan, replied, "Freedom."

Air Canada flight attendants vote to strike

Nearly 5,000 attendants, who have been without a contract since October of last year, voted overwhelmingly last week to go on strike. With 78 percent of flight attendants participating, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) members voted 94 percent in favor of a strike that could begin as early as July 7.

Key issues for workers are improvements to the pension plan, working conditions and the elimination of numerous concessions being sought by the company. Following the overwhelming strike mandate, the airline agreed to resume bargaining last Thursday.

Air Canada is seeking a pattern settlement in preparation with its upcoming contract negotiations with machinists. If this strike goes ahead it would be the fourth to hit Air Canada in three years. Last September, pilots staged a 13-day walkout and in 1997 both pilots and attendants at its regional carriers went on strike.

GM plant in Quebec threatened with sell-off

Reports emerged last week that Frank Stronach, chairman of manufacturing giant Magna International, is in negotiations with General Motors of Canada over the possible purchase of its St. Therese assembly plant. The plant, which is located in north of Montreal, has faced several rounds of layoffs in recent years, but is still one of Quebec's largest private sector employers. Threats to close St. Therese have resurfaced recently because of poor sales of GM's Camaro and Firebird models, which are produced at the plant.

The move is significant because it would signal that GM is divesting itself of auto assembly in Canada. The company already contracts out the bulk of its auto parts making to suppliers. Magna International is known principally as an auto parts manufacturer although they have been assembling cars in Europe. This would be their first assembly operation in North America.

Although GM continues to deny that any negotiations are taking place, the reports seem credible. If Magna takes over the plant the company may seek to decertify the union as it did at a plant absorbed last year.



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