

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 June 1999

Protests in Ecuador oppose austerity

Mass protests have erupted again in Ecuador against President Jamil Mahuad's attempt to assume extraordinary powers and force workers to pay for the economic crisis. The Patriotic Front, a coalition of unions and social organizations, called a day of nationwide protests and strikes on June 23 to protest against the "Marco Law" which would give Mahuad emergency powers to privatize whatever he sees fit to pay off Ecuador's indebtedness. Protesters were particularly angered by reports that the government warned at least 100 wealthy Ecuadorians that it was about to freeze accounts in the nation's banks, thus allowing them to move their funds before the decree went into effect.

As has been the pattern in these popular demonstrations, health workers led the protests. On June 22 they began a 48-hour strike. Teachers also joined. The National Symphony performed outdoors to publicize that the musicians have not been paid for three months.

The following day oil workers and others tried to enter the Congress to present an alternative economic policy. The police dispersed the workers with tear gas.

Meantime organizations of indigenous peoples and peasants declared that they would continue the protests until Mahuad gave up on the Marco Law. The Federation of Indian Nationalities announced that if Congress passes the "Marco Law" it will renew the mobilizations that were suspended in March. They promised to block roads and occupy the capital city.

Mexican authorities threaten striking university students

President Ernesto Zedillo has denounced the strike by National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) students as a "brutal aggression" and a leading newspaper has raised the specter of the 1968 government massacre of student protesters in an effort to intimidate and crush the two-month strike that has

shut down Latin America's largest university. The strike, which has gained support from faculty and workers in Mexico City, began when the university moved to raise tuition from two cents to nearly \$200 a year.

This month, facing strong opposition, university rector Francisco Barnes backed down saying the fees would be voluntary for all students, but that concession did not end the protest. Students, who say the right to free college education is guaranteed by the nation's constitution, are calling for a democratic university congress to decide on reforms, the elimination of limits of how long a student can stay at the university and the reinstatement of automatic UNAM admission for students from affiliated universities. Students are concerned that tuition hikes will be the government's first step towards introducing the same principles of privatization as has already been applied to industry.

Government and university authorities have intensified their efforts to turn public opinion against the student movement. They have made claims that left-wing student leaders are really frontmen for rebel groups in Chiapas and Guerrero who are seeking a confrontation with security forces. After a rancorous meeting on Saturday, UNAM students voted to meet with university officials on June 29 for their first formal talks since the strike began April 20.

Washington state meatpackers strike IBP

Meatpacking workers in Pasco, Washington, members of Teamsters Local 556, are continuing a strike at an IBP plant that began with a wildcat work stoppage June 4. The walkout, against speed up and management abuse on the killing floor, spread through the 1,000 member plant, forcing the Teamsters International union to officially recognize the strike.

The workers, many of whom are immigrants from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia, have been without a contract since March 30. IBP has vowed to keep the plant operating.

Doctors vote to organize

The American Medical Association voted June 23 to form a union of doctors to bargain with health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and other health care insurers. Doctors say managed care imposes one-sided contracts on them and has made it hard for them to provide quality care for their patients and pay overhead.

One out of seven doctors are now employees working for others, compared with earlier decades when nearly all doctors were self-employed businessmen who set their own fees. Almost eighty percent of patients currently belong to managed health care plans and more than a dozen health insurance competitors have been eliminated in the last five years due to mergers and acquisitions. According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, "this has led health insurance issuers to place physicians in a 'take it or leave it' position in terms of contracting. Ophthalmologists and other physicians are often forced to sign such contracts to sustain the viability of their practices because these large managed health care plans dominate the market."

As many as 7 percent of US doctors (40,000), many of whom are employed by HMOs, hospitals and public institutions, already belong to unions. Doctors must first win anti-trust exemption from the government before they can collectively bargain. The Federal Trade Commission is opposing the doctors' plan to unionize.

North Carolina textile mill unionized

Textile workers at the Fieldcrest-Cannon mills in Kannapolis, North Carolina voted 2,270 to 2,102 June 23 to form a union. With 5,200 workers in six plants joining the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), this marks the largest successful organizing drive in the South, particularly in the textile industry long known for its bitter opposition to unions.

Workers have been increasingly concerned over shifting ownership in the industry, threats to their jobs, speed up and other consequences of modernization. There has also been a large influx of immigrant workers who have supported the union drive.

The Cannon mills were built in 1906 by James Cannon, who built the company town Kannapolis. There was a bitter strike by workers in 1921 which was crushed. The first serious union election at the plant, which makes sheets and towels, came in 1974. The

union was defeated then, and again in 1985. The National Labor Relations Board threw out two elections, in 1991 and 1997.

Quebec nurses walk out

A partial strike by 47,500 nurses began in Quebec June 26. The province-wide action is considered illegal because Quebec's nurses are deemed to be performing an essential service and cannot walk out by law. The strike followed 14 months of negotiations with the provincial government over wages and working conditions.

The nurses are demanding a 6-percent wage increase over two years, plus a 10-percent catch-up increase. The government, thus far, refuses to offer nurses any more than the 5-percent wage hike over three years proposed for all of Quebec's 415,000 civil servants.

Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard said Friday an extraordinary meeting of the provincial cabinet and of the ruling Parti Quebecois caucus would be held on the matter in Quebec City Monday.

Quebec Health Minister Pauline Marois has said the government would not hesitate to apply tough sanctions on striking nurses, from pay cuts to fines and the loss of one year of seniority per nurse per day of strike.

The Quebec health system, which has been deprived of more than C\$2 billion of financing over the past five years because of government cutbacks, is in crisis, as pharmacists, emergency doctors and ambulance drivers have also staged periodic protests.

Meanwhile on Monday, Alberta's 17,000 nurses voted on whether to accept a final contract offer, while in Saskatchewan, a court is to rule on whether to fine the nurses' union over an illegal strike. Alberta's nurses' union has advised its members to accept an agreement that gives a 10 per cent pay hike. The Saskatchewan nurses' union is charged with contempt for ignoring a court order and sending its members to the picket line for 10 days last April. The union faces a \$1 million fine.



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