

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 July 1999

Saskatchewan nurses oppose union deal

Dissent has arisen among Saskatchewan nurses over the huge disparity in pay scales in the deal struck by their union and the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations.

The nurses went on illegal strike for 10 days this spring, defied back-to-work legislation and were fined \$150,000 for that action. They have recently learned that the deal reached on July 1 provides for wage differentials ranging as high as \$5 an hour depending on the area of nursing. Under the proposed agreement, public health nurses would receive an 18 percent increase, community mental health nurses would get a 10 percent raise, while acute care nurses would go up just 4.5 percent.

At recent meetings to explain the contract, voices were raised suggesting that the upcoming vote should reject the deal and the strike should be resumed. In response to opposition raised by the membership, the union leaders were forced to admit that the wage provisions were indeed a disappointment. The vote on the contract will be held at the end of the month.

Striking Newfoundland loggers blockade mill

Striking loggers used small boats to prevent a barge loaded with wood chips from docking at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper mill. Management at the mill had vowed to maintain full production when the workers went on strike almost three weeks ago against contracting out and the hiring of nonunion labor.

One worker was injured and taken to hospital last Friday in the showdown on the water, the latest development in the fight by 650 logging and mill workers. Members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), the workers had been picketing the wood yard gates, blocking the entry of chips and logs, to cut off paper production. In a flagrant provocation, the company last week arranged for the barge of wood chips from Quebec to be brought in to replenish the fiber supply so that production could continue uninterrupted.

The strike began when talks between the two sides broke down three weeks ago after which the company called the union back to the bargaining table but refused to negotiate. Neither the union leadership nor management are saying when talks will resume, but the shroud of secrecy suggests that a deal may be reached behind the strikers backs.

Tentative contract at West Coast docks

Officials of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and representatives of shipping interests on the

West Coast have come to an agreement, but terms are being withheld pending ratification votes by 14,500 union members.

Joe Miniace, president of the employers' group, the Pacific Maritime Association, announced at the conclusion of talks, "This agreement ushers in a new era for the West Coast waterfront as we move into the twenty-first century." The implication is that the deal clears the way for further productivity improvements at the expense of jobs.

Longshoremen in Oakland launched a wildcat strike after the July 4th holiday while others up and down the West Coast carried out slowdowns to protest the slow pace of talks.

Mechanics at US Airways reject tentative pact, approve possible strike

Airline mechanics at US Airways voted down a tentative contract proposal July 16 by a 75 percent margin. In a second vote, 81 percent of the 7,000 mechanics, represented by the International Association of Machinists, authorized strike action in the event company and union officials do not come to an agreement. US Airways concluded an agreement earlier this year with baggage handlers and in addition to mechanics it is attempting to come to agreement with the flight attendants union.

Baseball umpires vote to resign in protest

Major league baseball's umpires voted last Wednesday to resign on September 2 and not work the final month of the season. The move comes in response to a growing conflict between the Major League Umpires Association and baseball management over a variety of issues.

Fifty-seven of the 68 umpires attended the meeting, and all agreed to tender resignations. Six of the eleven umpires not attending will follow suit. Two of the remaining five umpires served the American League as scabs in the 1979 strike and are not members of the union.

"The purpose of this meeting was to address quarrels with baseball," umpires' union head Richie Phillips said. "The tension is much greater than it's ever been. Baseball is in a state of chaos." Phillips cited dismissal threats against umpires by management, the strike zone issue, a pay dispute stemming from games between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban team and the use of amateurs, some who served as scabs in previous strikes, to monitor pitches by television and make determinations that affect the careers of professional umpires.

Umpires are also critical over lack of concern by management involving altercations with players. In 1996 Roberto Alomar

was suspended for five games after spitting in the face of umpire John Hirschbeck. Umpires believed the suspension was too lenient. At the beginning of July umpire Tom Hallion was suspended for three days after a bumping incident with a player.

But the heart of the dispute is the fear on the part of umpires that baseball owners are preparing to further undermine past gains by locking them out after their present labor agreement expires on December 31. Under the terms of the current agreement, umpires are barred from striking, and the resignations serve as a way around the contract language. At the July 14 meeting umpires signed contracts with Umpire Inc., an organization that the major leagues would be required to contract with in order to obtain umpiring services.

Sandy Alderson, speaking for baseball commissioner Bud Selig, responded to the resignation plan: "This is either a threat to be ignored, or an offer to be accepted." The league plans to replace major league umpires with recruits from the minors, colleges and high schools.

But the attempt to recruit from the minors could prove difficult. On July 16 Phillips held a conference call with minor league umpires. Out of 228 minor league umpires, 220 have voted to form a union, but management has refused to recognize it. The resignations of major league umpires could be joined by a strike of minor league umpires for union recognition. Minor league officials indicate that they would seek an injunction against such a development.

While the media has portrayed the umpires as isolated, some players spoke out declaring they want the league to come to an agreement with the umpires and not hire replacements. "I hope that [the resignation] doesn't happen," said Jeff Reed, who was involved in the bumping incident with Hallion, "because that's when the pennant races start heating up and you want your best back there working the games."

"It's a big difference, there's no doubt about it," Chicago Cubs first baseman Mark Grace said. "They are the best at what they do."

Players union head Donald Fehr has since stepped in to block any further statements of support, stating, "It is my strong recommendation that no player make any public comments at this time."

Umpires were previously locked out in 1995 and missed the first 86 games of the regular season. They also struck the first seven weeks of the 1979 season and the first seven games of the 1984 playoffs.

Steelworkers file unfair labor practice charge at Ohio plants

The United Steelworkers has filed an unfair labor practices charge against Ormet corporation declaring the steel company is attempting to provoke a strike at the Hannibal Reduction Division plant and the Rolling Mill located in Ohio. A total of 1,800 union members at the two plants are working under an extended contract after the current agreement expired May 31.

The company claims that it is not opposed to the distribution of contract literature at the plants' gates and that it is only reacting to contract activity on its property that is affecting production. A USW spokesman countered, "That's absolutely an untruth. They wanted all activity stopped pertaining to this work dispute."

The suit comes after the NLRB dismissed all charges against the employer in another USW strike, by 3,000 workers who walked out at Kaiser Aluminum plants last September 30. The union is appealing the action taken by the NLRB's Oakland, California regional office to the agency's general counsel in Washington. Meanwhile the strike is continuing.

Protest hits privatization of Chile docks

Six thousand workers and their families and supporters marched through Chile's major port city, Valparaiso, July 14, protesting the mounting unemployment and the government's plans to sell off the state-owned port facilities. Dock workers staged a 24-hour strike to coincide with the day of protest.

In addition to the longshoremen, the demonstration included truck drivers, university students and teachers, shopkeepers, and many other residents of Valparaiso. The march was led by trucks and buses carrying floral wreaths and coffins to symbolize the "death" of a city which has been identified throughout its history with sea transport.

The government of President Eduardo Frei plans to sell off the port facilities to private investors, as part of its overall policy of privatization. In comments to the press made during the protest, Frei arrogantly defended his policies, despite the impact on a city which already has an unemployment rate of 13.4 percent.

Strikes and protests would only frighten away investors, he warned. "If you believe that strikes bring private investment, you have the right to your own opinion," Frei said. "The government clearly has its own."



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