

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 August 1999

Brazilian truckers strike

Transport was paralyzed in Brazil last week as hundreds of thousands of truckers protested to demand road repairs, the lowering of the price of fuel, better highway safety and an end to the corruption of cargo inspectors. The strike began in Rio de Janeiro when 1,200 truckers parked their vehicles one after the other on the road to Sao Paulo. Similar protests took place in 14 of the nation's 26 states. Brazilian truckers have a great deal of economic leverage since 80 percent of goods are shipped in trucks.

Brazil's major cities began experiencing scarcities of fuel and food on the first day of the strike. The strike ended on Thursday after the government agreed to suspend an increase in diesel prices, freeze tolls on some highways and send Congress a proposal that would penalize truckers less than other motorists for traffic violations. President Fernando Cardoso, facing the largest strike since an oil workers action in 1995, had authorized army troops to unclog blocked roads, but retreated in the face of the mass protest.

Brazil auto workers strike continues

As of late last week auto workers at Ford's Sao Paulo light truck plant were still on strike over job security. The strike began after a local newspaper reported Ford planned to close the facility and move production to the northeastern state of Bahia, an impoverished region known for lower wages. The union leaders charged the government's fiscal incentives to create jobs in Bahia are taking jobs away from Sao Paulo auto workers. The incentives will save Ford 180 million reales a year (\$100 million).

Ecuadorian Indians in struggle against transnational

On July 26 Indian organizations of the Ecuadorian Amazon region predicted that there would be violence if the consortium of British Petroleum and Amoco insists in carrying out operations. The Indians accuse the companies of looting their lands. The area to be exploited consists of 200 thousand hectares in the provinces of Pastaza and Morona Santiago, in eastern Ecuador. It is a tropical jungle region that is home to thousands of members of the Shuar and Achuar tribes. The natives charge the consortium with trying to divide the Indians to take their lands.

Truckers strike in Uruguay

Last week a national three-day truckers strike took place in Uruguay. The truckers protested road taxes that make it almost impossible to operate in the region. The tax affects 25,000 truckers. The strikers are also demanding reductions in their contributions to social security. Many truckers are heavily in debt. The government of President Sanguinetti has encouraged them to borrow to improve their equipment, so that Uruguay's truckers could compete with their Mercosur rivals. With the economic downturn, the truckers are in a precarious situation.

By last Sunday night the truckers began to assemble on the roads to the main ports. Nearly 15,000 trucks were lined up to make a 500 kilometer road block. After three days the strike organizers declared that the protest had been a success. They warned that a new strike would take place if the government does not address their demands. The strike affected mainly export industries.

Pact at Newport News Shipbuilding ratified

Workers at Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia voted July 30 to accept the agreement reached between management and the United Steelworkers (USW). But the final vote, 2,724 to 1,696 for approval, expressed widespread opposition to the agreement brought back by the USW leadership after 16 and a half weeks on the picket line. The fact that more than 6,300 workers did not vote was further testimony to the lack of confidence in the USW leadership. The agreement calls for a \$3.10 an hour increase over the duration of a 58-month contract, far below the union's original demand for \$3.95 over 36 months. NNS is the US Navy's sole builder of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers.

More tentative agreements follow US Steel pattern

The United Steelworkers (USW) reached a tentative agreement July 27 with Ispat Inland Inc., the sixth largest US steel producer. The pact is patterned on the USW settlement with Bethlehem and US Steel which resulted in a meager \$2 an hour increase over a five-year period along with some increases in pensions for current and retired workers. It covers 7,000 workers at Ispat Inland plants in Indiana and mining operations on Minnesota's Iron Range. Ispat Inland's London-based parent company had intended on closing the East Chicago blast furnaces and importing steel slabs from its plant in Mexico. It is unclear how the contract addresses this issue.

On Minnesota's Iron Range, tentative agreements were reached at all plants except EVTAC where labor talks have been put on hold pending the outcome of a takeover by Minnesota Iron & Steel. LTV Steel reached a tentative agreement July 29 with a unanimous vote by USW local presidents. Agreements were also reached with Hibbing Taconite and Cleveland Cliffs. While the pacts are patterned on the Bethlehem-US Steel agreement, details, which will fundamentally affect the jobs of steelworkers, are unknown pending ratification votes by rank-and-file steelworkers.

USW appeals to bankers in tire strike

United Steelworkers union officials held a meeting July 27 for business analysts in Frankfurt, Germany in an attempt to convince them to pressure the German tire maker Continental AG to come to an agreement in the 10-month-old strike by 1,450 workers at the company's Charlotte, North Carolina plant.

The union ran a full-page ad in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung under the headline: "Is Continental breaking a strike in the US or its own shareholders?" The USW spent \$25,000 on a study

by the New York consultant firm Locker Associates that termed the actions of Continental AG's parent company, the Hanover-based Conti group, "irrational."

"The union and the company were only \$2 million a year apart at the bargaining table and this strike could cost the company \$10 million a year in 1999 alone," Michael Locker, the firm's president said. But out of the 60 to 70 analysts and investors invited by the USW, at most seven, representing four investment houses, showed up.

When General Tire workers set up picket lines on September 21, 1998, the company responded by hiring the union-busting firm Vance Security and 800 strikebreakers. An analyst from a German bank, responding to the meeting, declared, "Conti seems to have the situation under control." The Conti group is the world's fourth largest tire maker and controls 8 percent of the world market.

Major league baseball umpires attempt to withdraw resignations

Umpires for major league baseball moved to withdraw their resignations July 27 after their mass resignation strategy began to collapse. Two weeks ago 56 of the 68 umpires agreed to hand in their resignations, effective September 2, in protest of an anticipated lockout by baseball owners at the end of the present season. The resignations served as a way of getting around a no-strike clause in their union contract.

But in the intervening period some umpires moved to withdraw their resignations, leading to what appears to be a general retreat from a plan conceived by union chief Richie Phillips to combine a mass resignation of major league umpires with a strike for union recognition by minor league umpires.

Lawyers representing the Major League Umpires Association filed a 14-page complaint in Philadelphia's US District Court that charged baseball commissioner Bud Selig and the American League with conspiring to withhold termination pay of up to \$400,000 per umpire. The object of the complaint is to allow umpires to rescind their resignations. It appears, however, that the club owners and major league management are selectively refusing to return resignations. Already 25 umpires from the minor leagues have been hired to replace about one-third of the unionized force.

Among the nine umpires whose resignations were already accepted and rescissions refused are: Rich Garcia, voted the third-best umpire by baseball players in a survey last winter, and Drew Coble, rated sixth.

Strike at Hydro-Quebec builds

Nearly 140 bill collection employees went on strike last Friday joining more than 1,300 technicians and clerks who have been off the job since May 5. Hydro-Quebec, North America's largest electrical utility, is also in conflict with chronically overbilled local customers and disgruntled big US power companies it supplies.

Most of the 11,000 Hydro-Quebec employees who remain on the job are deemed to be providing essential services under provincial law and have not been called out on strike. The union did, however, make an unsuccessful bid for 50 of Hydro-Quebec's 129 controllers, the technicians who control the flow of power, to join the action, but the province's essential services board ruled against them. The union has appealed that decision and, if successful,

certain controllers could be on strike by August 12. The strategy of the union rests on cutting off power to utilities served in northeastern US states which have faced increased demand due to this summer's heat wave. They hope to argue that by doing this they will not jeopardize "essential" electrical service in Quebec itself.

Hydro-Quebec, which generates and distributes most of the power in the province, has still not fully recovered from the ice storm of last year and will have an added backlog in connecting new local customers as a result of the strike. The company has said it will fight any attempt to put the controllers on the picket lines and the dispute will now go to third-party mediation.

Salvation Army imposes religious code in union contract

The Salvation Army has threatened to shut down one of its local programs in Vancouver unless selected personnel among the over 50 unionized staff, agree to follow a "code of Christian lifestyle" that requires they remain Christian, shun pornography, refuse to gamble and avoid sex outside marriage.

The British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU), which is negotiating a first contract for employees at the facility, condemned the demand for a Christian lifestyle clause which is similar to one recently invoked by Catholic school board trustees in Prince George, British Columbia. Catholic elementary teachers in Fort St. John, BC recently lost their bid for a first contract over a similar issue.

The BCGEU says the Salvation Army wants the unilateral right to fire employees, without a grievance procedure, if the missionary staff don't follow what the employer believes is a "biblical lifestyle." This is the first time such a clause has been sought by one of the Salvation Army's numerous Canadian welfare arms, many of which are unionized.

Montreal hotel workers stage one-day strike

Thousands of hotel workers struck 11 hotels in Montreal last Friday during the peak summer tourist season. The workers are seeking minimum 3 percent annual raises throughout a three-year contract as well as improved working conditions and better fringe benefits. The Confederation of National Trade Unions is negotiating on behalf of 4,500 workers at 23 major Montreal hotels and the Canadian Auto Workers is bargaining for 300 employees at the Delta Hotel. Deals were made at the Ritz-Carlton, Crowne Plaza Metro-Centre, Bonaventure Hilton, Nouvel Hotel and other hotels exempting them from the one-day strike.



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