Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 August 1999

Public transport workers strike for 24 hours in Bolivia

On August 4 the transport workers union carried out a 24-hour national strike that paralyzed public transportation in all of Bolivia, except for the cities of La Paz and Santa Cruz. The operators protested against the permanent *minigasolinazos*, i.e., frequent raises in the price of gasoline, and called for a government freeze on the price of fuel. They also demanded road improvements. During the month of July, strikes by transport workers have also taken place in Ecuador, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. In each of these strikes, the demands have been similar—a rejection of the government's transportation policies and demands for lower fuel prices.

Public employee strike in Costa Rica

Costa Rican public employees ended a six-day strike last Wednesday for better wages. The union and the government agreed to a 5 percent pay raise and a $34 bonus. The agreement covers 80,000 public employees.

Paraguayan workers protest privatizations

Last Thursday, almost 10,000 state workers launched a 48-hour strike. The action was to protest the government's privatization policy. Among the striking workers were telephone, water, and electricity workers, as well as fuel and cement workers. The Paraguayan state is one of the main employers in the country, with 150,000 civilian workers. The government now plans to sell many of its agencies to private capitalists.

Strike ends at Ford plant in Brazil

The Brazilian subsidiary of Ford Motor Co. reached an agreement August 2 with union leaders to end a 10-day strike at the company's Sao Paulo truck plant over Ford's plans to shift production to lower-wage regions of the country. The factory's nearly 1,500 workers launched a militant strike July 22 after a local newspaper reported Ford would shut down the plant and transfer production to the northeastern state of Bahia. Officials from the Sao Paulo metalworkers union ended the strike in exchange for a company guarantee that no layoffs would occur for a year and that the union would have a say as to where, when and how the factory will be transferred. The union has also reportedly received guarantees that workers from the factory will be employed at the new facilities.

Northwest Airlines pilot victimized after raising safety issues

Craig Friday, a 21-year pilot at Northwest Airlines, has charged management grounded him in retaliation for raising safety concerns dealing with the weight of loaded aircraft. Last fall, under a labor contract procedure that allows Northwest to order a medical exam of a pilot, a company-assigned doctor claimed he found evidence of a “cognitive impairment” and that Friday was unfit for duty. Northwest has stopped his pay and restricted his access to airline personnel and property.

Friday, who is 49 years old and lives in the Seattle area, wrote 70 letters, many to Northwest CEO John Dasburg, about aircraft weight and balance problems starting in 1994. The Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) has sided with Northwest saying that Friday didn't adhere to the proper procedure for reporting safety issues. Friday counters that normal channels did not provide a sufficient response to his queries.

In a statement to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Northwest says it “believes that many, if not all, of these allegations are the product of Mr. Friday's medical condition.” Friday charges that Northwest's use of the medical exam will have a chilling effect on other pilots who might want to press the company on safety issues. ALPA's leadership council responded to this accusation by passing a resolution in July that declared pilots should not fear that Northwest would abuse the medical exam procedure to “harass or intimidate.” Friday responded, “The message is ‘Stay in line, or else.' You want to stand up for safety? Well, look what happened to Capt. Friday.”

A Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) report commended Northwest's approach to safety issues while charging Friday with going outside the specified reporting parameters. But while declaring Friday's safety analysis and conclusions as “somewhat flawed,” it went on to say Friday's suggestions for implementing more weight checks and weight surveys had “substantial merit.” The FAA report conceded, “In some ways he has succeeded” in improving safety. The implication is that while Northwest was victimizing Friday, it was also quietly implementing some of his suggestions.

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Friday has filed a lawsuit against Northwest charging the company retaliated against his whistle-blowing by medically grounding him. Northwest has filed a suit of its own against Friday's wife alleging business defamation, charging that in a news release she suggested Northwest's flight operations were unsafe. Craig Friday says nothing in the news release was false or misleading.

Basic steel pacts pass at Bethlehem, US Steel

The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) announced that the union membership has ratified the five-year pact recently negotiated jointly with Bethlehem and US Steel. Workers at US Steel approved the contract by 7,898 to 3,318, while Bethlehem steelworkers voted 6,792 to 2,048 to accept.

The passage of the agreement cannot reflect any enthusiasm for the new contract. A mere $2-an-hour raise over five years will do little to improve living standards of workers. In addition, what the union and company termed “pension improvements” were nothing more than a one-time lump sum payment of $50 for current retirees, many of whom have protested against the agreement. Any future yearly payments are dependent on company profits.

Meanwhile the USWA leadership is continuing to isolate strikes at Kaiser Aluminum, Continental Tire and Titan Tire, which are approaching a year in duration.

Pilots union at American Airlines offers proposal to settle Reno Air merger dispute

Pilots union leaders at American Airlines approved a proposal August 6, aimed at reaching an agreement with management over the acquisition of Reno Air by the airlines parent, AMR Corp. The Allied Pilots Association (APA) will not release any details of the proposal before American Airlines has had an opportunity to review it.

AMR attempted to merge Reno with American Airlines but avoid raising Reno pilots' wages and benefits to the same level as American pilots, as required under the scope clause of the contract. When pilots rejected a company merger proposal, AMR simply defied the union contract and implemented it. This led to a sick-out by pilots that resulted in the cancellation of more than 6,700 flights last February. The courts rallied to AMR's defense by implementing a temporary restraining order and then fining the pilots' union $45.5 million for not ending the sick-out quickly enough. The APA is presently appealing the fine. The scope clause in several contracts with US pilots' unions is seen as an impediment to management's strategy of outsourcing jobs under “partnerships” and “alliances” with both domestic and international lower-wage carriers.

Local agreements rejected at half of Anheuser-Busch plants

Teamsters at 12 Anheuser-Busch facilities ratified a five-year national contract with the producer of Budweiser, Michelob and other beers. But union members at 6 of the 12 plants rejected local agreements and Anheuser-Busch has said that without the local supplements it would not recognize the national agreement. According to Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, the 8,000 Teamster members, including bottlers, distillers, truck drivers and mechanics, ratified the agreement by a 59 percent margin. An Anheuser-Busch spokesperson indicated that management will meet with Hoffa to discuss the possibility of applying the national contract only to those brewery locals that have accepted local agreements, thereby splitting the union.

Vancouver truckers strike hits port facilities

Truckers in Vancouver have been on strike for more than two weeks in a dispute over removal of containers from Canada's largest port. The truckers, who own their own vehicles, want more money from trucking companies that carry containers to and from the docks. The truckers are paid per unit, but want to switch to hourly wages to compensate for time spent waiting to load.

Port officials have complained that the diversion of ships to Tacoma, Seattle and other US ports along the Pacific Ocean is giving Vancouver a reputation of unreliability and undoing progress it has made attracting new shipping lines and additional container business. Port officials acknowledge Vancouver has been able to increase its container business, in part, because of labor disputes at rival US port facilities. “We've played on that and now we've got one of our own,” an official said.

Quebec public school teachers may strike this fall

Public school teachers from Quebec's largest teacher's union, Centrale de l'Ensignment du Quebec, along with the anglophone Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers may strike this fall for increased salaries and better working conditions. The unionized teachers who, as of last week, were in a legal strike position are planning a work-to-rule at the beginning of the school year. The 10,000 teachers will be boycotting field trips and extracurricular activities and are scheduled for a vote on a strike mandate September 10.

Teachers are asking for an 11 percent raise in their average salary of $44,000 and pay equity. The Quebec government has offered the standard 5 percent raise, as they have with other public sector workers.

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