

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 August 1999

## **Tentative settlement averts strike at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital**

A strike by nurses at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City was averted Monday when a tentative settlement was reached 90 minutes before the union was to establish picket lines. Nurses have been working without a contract since last December 31.

The major issue in the dispute has been staffing. Spokesmen for the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), the union representing 1,600 registered nurses at the hospital, explained that the facility was severely understaffed. Nurses complained that they often had to work another 8 or 12 hours after completing their regular 12-hour shifts. In addition, the small number of nurses caring for a large number of patients created a real health hazard.

At the center of the agreement is the establishment of a joint union-management committee to recommend staffing levels for each unit in this 900-bed hospital. This committee will have four union members and four representatives from management. However, management will have the right to veto virtually any decision that this joint committee makes.

The union obtained a 3 percent wage increase in the second and the third years of the contract. Negotiators also accepted a bonus in lieu of a wage hike for the first year. To help pay for this, the union is allowing management to skip this year's contribution to the nurses' pension fund. The hospital calculates that it will save anywhere from \$6 million to \$8 million over the life of the three-year contract.

## **Four US retailers settle suit over dealings with Saipan sweatshops**

Four US clothing retailers have moved to settle out of court a class action lawsuit over workers' rights on the US territorial island of Saipan in the Western Pacific. The suit alleged that the companies—Nordstrom, Cutter & Buck, Gymboree and J. Crew—contracted with sweatshop factories that violated labor laws and the human rights of 50,000 past and present workers.

The four retailers agreed to set up a \$1.25 million fund that would establish an independent monitor of the foreign-owned factories on the island that claims to insure compliance with US labor laws and international treaties governing human rights. The fund would also provide partial recompense to workers and create a public education campaign to make consumers aware of the sweatshop issue. The settlement also bars contractors from using recruitment fees.

In addition to settling the class action suit that took place in Los Angeles federal court, the four companies will also settle a separate Superior court suit in San Francisco that alleges unfair business practices. Another 14 US retailers, including Gap, J.C. Penney and Sears, continue to resist any settlement with the legal and human rights groups that brought the lawsuits forward.

Some 36 apparel factories on Saipan presently employ 15,000 workers—mainly women—from China, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Thailand. Workers were lured through offers of high-paying jobs in the US to sign contracts that basically made them indentured servants. Instead of arriving in California, they were transported to Saipan where they ended up living in vermin-infested barracks surrounded with barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards. Water and food were often contaminated. Some workers suffered beatings and others forced abortions. They work

12-hour days; the first 8 hours compensated at the rate of \$3 an hour, and the last 4 hours “donated” free. They also have to pay back “recruitment” fees that could run up to \$7,000. Any protest against the conditions led to firings and victimizations.

In addition to the advantages of cheap labor, the companies reaped a killing due to the fact that Saipan, as a US territory, would allow the manufactures to avoid US tariffs. In the most recent fiscal year, it is estimated that \$1 billion in wholesale clothing was shipped from Saipan into the United States duty free, saving the manufacturers \$200 million.

Dayton Hudson Corp, one of the 14 retailers challenging the suits, declared, “We intend to continue to defend ourselves against these lawsuits, which we think are without merit.”

Verite, a Massachusetts-based non-profit firm, will serve as the monitor of Saipan's factories. Using announced and unannounced visits it is supposedly empowered to force companies to pay back wages, overtime and conform to industry law and standards.

Cutter & Buck Chairman and CEO Harvey Jones termed the company's agreement to a settlement “a business decision.”

## **Contract talks begin at Boeing**

Contract talks between Boeing, the manufacturer of passenger jet aircraft, and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) begin August 16. The union represents 44,000 out of a 210,000 worldwide workforce. The company is slated to put forward an offer by August 27, with a union ratification vote scheduled for September 1, one day before the expiration of the present three-year agreement.

Among the more contentious issues will be job security, control of pension funds and work schedules. In a competitive race with its European rival Airbus Industrie, Boeing has sharply cut its workforce and 1,334 more workers received layoff notices last week.

Presently the company controls the \$15 billion pension fund that covers IAM members and another 1,400 salaried employees. The union fears the fund presents a lure to corporate raiders who might use it to leverage a buyout.

Boeing is seeking a \$400 million cost-saving proposal to eliminate overtime by establishing a seven-day workweek of three shifts, in place of the present five-day week in which a majority of employees work the day shift and work considerable amounts of overtime on the weekend.

## **Toronto city workers vote to strike**

This fall may see municipal workers in various departments walk off the job as strike votes are taken in the coming weeks in Toronto. Last week the first of these by 7,000 outdoor workers of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) returned a vote of 90 percent in favor of strike action.

Local 416 is the only one of six unions representing 28,000 full-time and seasonal workers to have completed conciliation with the city. In turning down the city's offer of a 2 percent a year wage increase, the union was compelled to get a strike mandate from the membership. This round of contract talks is the first since the amalgamation of all former Metro municipalities into one city.

In anticipation of possible widespread unrest, the city has asked the provincial government to appoint a three-member board of conciliation which would be the first such board in 25 years. The union has charged

that the city is trying to delay a possible strike by the outdoor workers until the legislature is recalled in September so the city can seek a back-to-work order.

Negotiations, which have gone on for six months, are continuing. A strike could not be called until August 28 at the earliest, and would affect outdoor workers, including garbage collectors, parks workers and paramedics, most of whom haven't had a raise in eight years.

#### **Vancouver truckers strike heats up**

About 450 truck owner-operators, who are responsible for moving half this Pacific port's container traffic, are in the third week of what has become a bitter strike against 25 trucking companies.

The truckers are fighting to go from being paid a flat rate per trip to an hourly wage of \$53. The companies are insisting on the piecework arrangement, but with a raise in the flat rate. Over 5,000 shipping containers have piled up on the dock since the strike began and the Vancouver Port Authority has reported that the strike has cost the British Columbia economy \$55 million in lost business.

Asserting that non-striking drivers are being intimidated by strikers, the Port Authority, while claiming neutrality in the dispute, is seeking an injunction to keep striking drivers from picketing on port property. Port lawyers, however, have not been able to obtain necessary signatures on affidavits from any drivers.

#### **Union abandons strikers at Nova Scotia hotel**

Workers at the Rodd Grand Hotel in Yarmouth, who have been on strike for over four months, have had their strike pay summarily cut off by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union.

Yarmouth is the point of entry for tourism from the US, and the Rodd Grand is its major hotel. The union has made no comment on why strike pay has been halted, but it has been suggested that the union is bowing to pressure from local businesses, which are claiming that the strike could damage tourism in the town for the future.

The union had been seeking a 60 cent raise over three years from the current average rate of \$7.60 an hour with the company offering a paltry 30 cents. In addition to a wage increase, the workers are also fighting for improvements in working conditions at the hotel. When the workers originally voted to go on strike, management immediately locked workers out. Since that time no talks have been held or scheduled.

#### **Worker dies in mass protests over back wages in Argentina**

An Argentine worker died from a massive heart attack during an attack by police on a march for back wages in Tucuman, in the northwest of the country. The police arrested hundreds of protesters.

The workers are now insisting on the freedom of the detained workers as well as the immediate payment of their back salaries. However, the Tucuman government has requested police reinforcements to prevent further demonstrations, while it negotiates a loan from the Central Bank to pay the arrears. On Friday, the third day of protests in Tucuman, about 1,000 workers set off firecrackers and threw stones at police.

In the Patagonia region, mass protests of public employees also took place in Neuquen for a third day in a row, converting the downtown area into a battle zone. The battle began when 200 workers and teachers moved into the downtown area, throwing rocks at government buildings.

Other demonstrations took place in the provinces of Corrientes and Tierra del Fuego. Public employees are protesting 7,000 layoffs and demanding back pay. Some of the workers have not been paid since May. In Buenos Aires, Interior Vice Minister Jorge Matzkin declared that the government is not "worried," since it does not "contemplate the possibility of social unrest."

#### **Mexican student strike on its 115th day**

August 13, 1999 marked the 115th day of the student strike at Mexico City's National Autonomous University (UNAM). A mass demonstration took place at Mexico City's central square, *El Zocalo*. Thousands of students filled the square to denounce the attempt by the government and

UNAM authorities to reopen the campus for the fall.

The students were supported by part of the Teachers Union (CNTE), the United Organization of Workers (CUT) and by Indian and radical groups.

The student march denounced Mexico City's mayor, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. The students hold Cardenas responsible for ordering the police to repress student pickets blocking attempts to open registration for next semester's classes. Students chanted: *Farsante! Golpeas Estudiantes!* ("You are a fraud! You beat students!") The students denounced the role being played by Cardenas's party, the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). They burned PRD flags in protest.

The students are striking in defense of the right to a free and equitable university education.

#### **Mass protest for jobs in Chile**

The Chilean United Workers Organization (CUT), carried out a day of National Protest on August 10. The protest demanded that the Frei government fight unemployment. The workers also demanded the cancellation of draft legislation that absolves the state of responsibility for unemployment, and that the government carry out job creation measures. The workers are demanding that money owed by the unemployed for basic services, such as water, gas and telephone, be written off.

The draft law that the workers oppose, the Law to Protect the Unemployed Worker (PROTAC), proposed financing unemployment using the workers' own savings and employer contributions. If passed, the Chilean State would effectively remove itself as a provider of workers' health, retirement, and other social benefits.

The protest took place in every major city. In Santiago, 6,000 workers marched 20 blocks and handed the government a petition with their demands. If there is no response the CUT plans a national strike on October 30.

#### **Miners mobilize in Bolivia**

Miners in the Bolivian region of Amayapampa are mobilizing in defense of their jobs. They warn that if the Vista Gold mine closes, as management is threatening to do, they will take over operations and continue mining the gold.

On Thursday, a miners assembly demanded that Vista Gold fulfill its contractual obligations until the year 2000. The assembly also organized a protest march in Amayapampa to agitate for jobs. They described the protest as a preventive measure that could escalate.

Vista Gold pays a monthly bonus to the miners and also allows them to mine on their own. Vista Gold management claims that the closure of the mine is due to its poor safety record. For their part, the miners are ready to take over the entire mine to defend their right to jobs.



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