

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 September 1999

Child killed in Colombia national strike

A 10-year-old girl was shot and killed last Tuesday on the first day of Colombia's national strike in Ciudad Bolivar, a poor neighborhood of Bogota, the capital city. The death occurred when the police and army confronted the strikers. In addition to the girl's death, there was an attempt on the life of Domingo Tovar, vice president of the CUT, the country's union federation, when police in downtown Bogota fired upon him. The government claims that it was a mistake.

The 48-hour strike had been organized by the public sector workers to protest the economic policies of the government of Andres Pastrana and against the repression of the unions. Since 1986, over 2,000 trade unionists have been killed in Colombia. The government has agreed to release 200 workers arrested during the strike and to begin assigning five government ministers to negotiate with the union.

Originally the unions had presented 41 demands, which included a moratorium on Colombia's debt repayment. Pastrana has agreed to negotiate on 40 of the demands—all except a proposal to discuss its agreements with the International Monetary Fund.

Thousands march against Bolivia price increases

Last Thursday over 10,000 workers heeded a call by the Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) and marched on La Paz, Bolivia's capital, to protest the high cost of living and the policies of President Hugo Banzer.

Following the speeches denouncing Banzer in the San Francisco Square, groups of marchers eluded the police and reached the Central Bank, where Banzer was engaged in talks on the economy, to shout their repudiation of Bolivia's politicians. The demonstration continued until early Friday morning.

No sooner had the labor protest ended than the Federation of Neighborhood Committees of La Paz paralyzed parts of the capital. The streets were deserted and columns of workers from several neighborhoods marched toward the center of town. Neighborhood representatives said that the 24-hour stoppage, which included all public transport, was only the first of several measures against price increases in essential consumer goods.

Indian protests in Colombia, Guyana

The Colombian Indian community of Los Pastos, in the Department of Narino in southwestern Colombia, blocked the Pan American Highway on the Ecuador/Colombia border for five days. The demonstrators were demanding a better system of granting land, health and housing programs and the cleanup of their environment. On the night of Friday, September 3, they lifted the blockade after the government agreed to provide them with monetary aid and to address some of their other demands. The blockade cost about \$2 million a day.

In Guyana, nine Indian tribes are organizing a march for the beginning of October. Ten thousand Indians will march to press the government for title to their lands. The march will cover 1,000 kilometers, beginning in the town of Wai Wai. Along the route more natives will join in. The organizers predict that 20 percent of Guyana's native population will participate in the protest. They also claim that the government is delaying granting Indians title to 40,000 square kilometers of land.

Internet campaign behind Northwest contract rejection

In the recent 69 percent no vote by flight attendants that defeated the

tentative agreement at Northwest Airlines, rank-and-file opponents of the entrenched Teamsters bureaucracy used the Internet to link the 11,000 workers, who are scattered across 10 airport bases and 400 planes. A constant barrage of criticism was leveled against the bureaucracy from web sites advocating improvements in the pensions, wages and working conditions of flight attendants.

An attendant from Honolulu set up the web site www.cleardaze.com/nwafacontract last May that offers a live chat room for flight attendants to discuss the contract. Since its inception it has been visited more than 22,000 times. Another Seattle-based web site www.nwafa.org has published contract analysis and letters critical of the Teamsters leadership.

No sooner was the tentative agreement reached last June 10 than San Francisco flight attendant Jose Arturo Ibarra issued a bulk e-mail message to 1,500 flight attendants entitled "Anger" which opposed the proposal. The nwafa.org web site issued an "open letter to Billie," the Teamsters Local 2000 president, that was signed by 1,611 flight attendants, rejecting the tentative agreement. It criticized wages and retirement proposals and reviewed recent contract struggles at TWA and America West where flight attendants rejected initial tentative agreements and went on to obtain improved contracts. The web site contains an analysis of the contract that extracts clauses and points out deficiencies in wages, retroactive pay, vacations, retirement, working conditions and job security.

Among the individual letters published on the web site are attacks on the Teamsters officials for deliberately obscuring the meaning of the contract language, denunciations of "intimidation tactics that have been employed to bully and coerce" union members, criticism of the wage package, and a comment on the bureaucracy's mercenary attitude to the contract talks: "As our membership is currently paying about \$418,000/month to the International in dues [\$38 x 11,000], Mr. Hoffa does not have the right to tell us that we must stop negotiations and accept the first deal that NWA offers just because he doesn't want to lose any more money."

Machinists ratify Boeing contract

Members of the International Association of Machinists based in Washington state, Oregon and Kansas ratified a tentative agreement by an 86 percent margin, ending the threat of a strike against Boeing Co.

Some 71 percent of the 44,000 production workers voted on the contract that calls for an 11 percent increase over three years. To get the agreement, Boeing dropped demands for employee contributions to medical coverage along with the proposal to add a weekend shift thereby doing away with overtime. The deal offers a 25 percent increase in pension payments to \$50 a month per year of service, far short of the 300 percent increase called for by the union. A signing bonus, worth an average \$4,400 per worker, is also contained in the agreement.

The contract contained a clause that guaranteed "no layoffs as a direct result of subcontracting or offloading." The significance of this clause is uncertain and contradictory to other claims that the job security language gives the IAM bureaucracy a degree of oversight concerning proposals for subcontracting work to outside companies. Bill Johnson, president of the Seattle IAM local, indicated he is already apprised of Boeing's plans for what is called "lean manufacturing initiatives" that he claims will "create more jobs instead of less."

But Boeing has already made deep cuts in its 200,000-plus work force and plans another 20,000 layoffs by the end of the year 2000. These moves are a part of its attempt to maintain profitability in a slumping market for commercial jets that is projected to fall to 480 in 2000 from a record 620 in 1999.

Washington state truckers strike halted

The Teamsters union suspended a 14-day-old strike by independent truck drivers at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma in Washington state for 30 days August 31 without reaching an agreement with the port authority and trucking companies.

About half of the 1,000 independent truckers signed union cards and set up picket lines to demand hourly pay and protest working conditions that cause long delays and undermine their living standards. Drivers, paid by the load, find themselves under present conditions making the equivalent of \$8.50 an hour and unable to cover the maintenance expenses for their trucks along with bank payments.

A similar strike by Canadian independent truckers at the Port of Vancouver shut down operations and caused major delays in shipping before an hourly pay agreement was reached. Teamsters Local 174 Secretary-Treasurer Bob Hasegawa said of the suspension of picketing, "We wanted to show the union was willing to work together with the ports and trucking company owners to find a long-term solution." The port authority welcomed the Teamsters action.

When the truckers first went out on strike members of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union were prepared to honor picket lines before an arbitrator ordered them to go to work. "We're not asking other unions to stop work," said another Teamsters official.

Truckers at the West Coast ports used to be unionized but with the advent of the deregulation of the trucking industry broke the union by shifting to independent owner-operators.

Vermont NEA staff strikes against union

Twelve staff members began picketing the office of the Vermont-National Education Association in Montpelier September 3 to demand meaningful bargaining and to protest abusive treatment at the hands of the union bureaucracy.

For 18 months secretaries, union organizers, media directors and other staff personnel have been seeking to reach an agreement with the Vermont-NEA board of directors and union President Angelo Dorta. In a display of arrogance the board has threatened to impose merit pay for staff members—something the NEA in Vermont and nationwide opposes in the classroom. Workers describe the NEA bargainers as "acting like a school board."

On the first day of picketing teachers from the Hyde Park local, who were on strike earlier in the spring, turned out in full strength to support staffers on the picket line. Strikers are asking supporters to send messages of protest to the Vermont-NEA at: adorta@nea.org

Airline workers threaten strike

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, which represents 18,500 workers, mainly maintenance workers, baggage handlers and refuelers, at Air Canada, Canadian Airlines and several airline service companies, threatened to strike in defiance of federal laws if Transport Minister David Collenette did not give a job guarantee by September 27.

Pointing to the protracted financial difficulties of Canadian Airlines, the Liberal Party government has suspended the competition rules forbidding talks between major players in the airline industry. Within days, Gerry Schwartz, a big contributor to the Liberals, unveiled a plan to merge Canadian Airlines and Air Canada, the two major airline companies in Canada, thus establishing a privately owned monopoly of passenger air transport.

Schwartz has already admitted that 5,000 layoffs will result of the merger, but many experts are saying that about twice as many job cuts

would be required for the industry to become profitable. This means that about a sixth of airline jobs may disappear as a result of the merger.

The other union at the two airlines, the Canadian Auto Workers, has made no strike threat. CAW President Buzz Hargrove said that CAW members wouldn't cross picket lines at airports. He met privately with Schwartz and declined to oppose the merger plan, saying that while no assurance had been given against layoffs, "We're certainly more comfortable with what's on the table here."

Hargrove said he favors a scheme in which both Canadian carriers continue flying while reducing the number of overlapping flights. "We're calling for a restructuring that will mean less jobs, but doesn't have to mean layoffs," Hargrove said. "Restructuring has to take place with no forced layoffs."

Pharmacists barred from quitting

One thousand pharmacists who submitted resignations as a means of protesting the refusal of the Quebec provincial government to negotiate with them on pay will not be allowed to quit their jobs, according to an order issued by the province's Essential Services Council. The pharmacists from 250 Quebec hospitals were told to show up for work on Tuesday, September 7, and leaders of the Health Establishment Pharmacists Association have said they would comply with the order to show "their professionalism and their integrity."

In the midst of the nurses strike, at the beginning of July, 90 percent of the pharmacists submitted their resignations, to be effective at the beginning of this month, to protest against the fact that the government refuses to negotiate with them. They are asking for a 17 percent salary increase, based on a comparison with other health professionals. They have been without a contract since 1995.

The government responded to this protest by putting the pharmacists under the jurisdiction of the Essential Services Council, under a clause of the special back-to-work law that was passed by the provincial parliament against the nurses strike. Previously the pharmacists were not covered by the Essential Services Law, since their association is not technically a union.



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