

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 September 1999

Nicaragua: Protest over high cost of living

On September 11 the Communal Movement and other civic organizations called for civil disobedience against the high cost of living in Nicaragua.

Groups from other parts of the country joined thousands of residents of Managua in a massive march toward the presidential residence and National Assembly. Porfirio Gamez, national coordinator of the Communal Movement, denounced the government for shutting off electricity and water services to the poor for nonpayment. He proposed the formation of popular brigades that would reconnect services for these families in defiance of the state authorities. Volunteers would be properly trained with the necessary equipment. "We are telling the government that we are forced to carry out these measures because poor families have nothing to pay the fees," said Gamez.

Brazil: "The cry of the excluded" protest

On September 8 over 2,000 cities in Brazil participated in a national protest called "The Cry of the Excluded" to denounce the government's economic policies. The demonstrations were organized by the trade unions and the Landless Movement to demand that President Fernando Henrique Cardoso abandon economic policies that have increased unemployment and poverty.

In Aparecida, 130 kilometers north of Sao Paulo, over 70,000 people joined the protest. This is the fourth "Cry of the Excluded" in Brazil, and each time the support has grown. The next protest in October will involve other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean Basin and will demand that domestic spending no longer be subordinated to debt repayments. This year's total debt for Latin America and the Caribbean will reach \$706 billion. Since 1985 interest payments alone have increased to \$739 billion.

45,000 health workers in Peru to strike

On September 14, 45,000 Peruvian health workers will strike for 24 hours to protest the government's plan to put municipalities in charge of public health services. The workers are also demanding that 20 percent of the national budget be dedicated to health services and the creation of a national solidarity fund.

The country of 24 million has one doctor for every 1,000 inhabitants. Ninety-seven out of every one thousand children die before reaching the age of five, and 25 percent of the population has no access to health services.

Dialysis patients protest in Peru

On September 7 about 30 dialysis patients suffering from chronic renal disease occupied the Temple of Santo Domingo in the capital of Lima. They demanded that the Social Security agency distribute enough funds to provide adequate services.

The president of the Hemodialysis Patients Association, Cesar Inocente Chilet, declared that the government's criteria in selecting medical providers was cost, not quality. Patients report that they are not receiving decent care. Peru has been privatizing the Social Security system. Recently it began accepting bids from contractors for dialysis services with those clinics. The occupation of the temple will continue indefinitely.

Teachers strike in the Dominican Republic

Teachers in the Dominican Republic launched a 48-hour strike

September 5 for higher wages. Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez had announced a pay hike by the end of this year, but the teachers are demanding immediate increases. The 48-hour stoppage is supposed to be the first of many.

University strike in Costa Rica

On September 6 a strike of academic and administrative workers hit the University of Costa Rica (UCR) and the Technological Institute, the main centers of higher learning in Costa Rica. The walkout has closed down UCR and severely hampered the activities at the Technological Institute. The employees are demanding a 3.8 percent wage increase and additional government funding of \$6.8 million for the university and institute.

Teachers on indefinite strike in El Salvador

El Salvador's strongest teachers union began an indefinite strike September 8. The National Association of Educators (ANDES), which includes 29,000 teachers, is demanding a 30 percent wage increase. The strike is having an impact on 60 percent of the country's schools.

The teachers, whose wages range from \$345 to \$505 a month, are demanding a \$30 to \$40 raise. Since last June when President Francisco Flores took office, teachers and public workers have organized several protests. The government has denounced the teachers for being "irresponsible."

Negotiations to continue at US Airways

Extended negotiations with US Airways were announced by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) with the aim to stave off a strike by 7,000 machinists and cleaners at the nation's sixth-largest airline. The final round of talks was expected to go from September 13 to 15.

IAM District 141 Assistant General Chairman William Freiburger revealed, "If we continue to meet beyond the 15th, then that's an indication that the parties will try to settle the dispute. If there's no movement ... I think both parties are looking at a work stoppage."

In July workers voted down a tentative agreement by a 75 percent margin. Freiburger admitted that subsequent negotiations produced "hardly any movement at all on any of the big issues." The union is presently under a 30-day cooling off period that will expire on September 26, freeing the union for strike action.

Negotiations have been deadlocked over management's demand that service workers be allowed to perform 1,500 jobs previously staffed by the IAM's bargaining unit. US Airways also wants to hire part-timers, which would further erode IAM full-time positions. The IAM is calling for an immediate 4 percent wage increase followed by 4 percent increases in each year of the new agreement.

US Airways, like other airlines, has racked up large profits in the recent period as a result of earlier concessions by the IAM. The company reported a net income of \$363 million for the first six months of 1999.

Talks open between pilots and Delta Airlines

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) opened talks with Delta Airlines September 8 with the union calling for increased wages, benefits, vacation, training pay and the codification of rest rules. Other proposals include the elimination of a lower pay scale for pilots who fly the company's low-cost airline, Delta Express. In what will prove to probably be one of the more contentious issues, ALPA is seeking to reduce the number of regional flights performed by Delta's subsidiaries. The ALPA

bureaucracy also wants to alter their position on Delta's board of directors to a voting position from the present non-voting seat.

The present contract's "amendable date" is slated for May of 2000. Delta has raked in yearly profits of \$1 billion since ALPA granted Delta large concessions in 1996.

Hearing begins over explosion at Kaiser plant

A federal panel opened hearings last week on the July 5 explosion that injured 24 workers at a strike-bound Kaiser Aluminum plant in Convent, Louisiana. Both the company and the United Steelworkers union agree the explosion was an accident. Workers testified that a high pressure cooker that extracts alumina from bauxite blew up when the power failed. If the hearings find Kaiser in violation of codes the federal government could level up to \$55,000 in fines for each violation or unsafe practice. Steelworkers at Kaiser plants in Louisiana, Washington state and Oregon have been on strike over job security for over a year.

Massachusetts bus strike ends

School bus drivers in Brookline and Newton, Massachusetts were ordered back to work September 8 by the Teamsters union after reaching a tentative agreement. The union called a strike two days earlier after Laidlaw Transit refused to include health benefits for family members and adequate wage increases in its contract offer. Some 45 strikers parked a tractor-trailer in front of the company's Boston depot. After the entrance was cleared workers prevented management from manning the buses by mass picketing. Two thousand of the eleven thousand students in the two school districts were affected by the work stoppage.

Struggles by teachers unfold as school opens

Teachers of the Wilkinsburg Education Association in the Pittsburgh area walked out September 7 after the school board failed to grant them a 4.6 percent pay hike over the next four years. They join Pittsburgh teachers of the Highlands School District who struck September 6 and could be followed by teachers in the Peters Township, who have overwhelming voted to strike if school officials don't come to terms on a new contract.

In New Jersey the superintendent of the Windsor-Plainsboro school district declared classes will continue in the event of a teachers strike and began to line up substitute teachers to serve as strikebreakers. The contract expired in June but the union and school board have failed to reach an agreement on salaries and benefits.

A last-ditch effort was begun September 10 by school negotiators and the Buffalo Teachers Federation in New York State to avert a strike. Teachers gave strike authorization on September 6 and returned to classes on September 8. But the district has resisted the union's demand for an 11 percent pay raise.

Meanwhile, support staff at Ohio's Revere schools launched a strike September 8 over job security issues affecting bus drivers, cafeteria workers and custodians.

Report outlines reduction of health benefits by companies

The Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) has just released a study outlining the decline in health benefits received by workers. Overall, the institute found that 16 percent of American workers have no form of health insurance.

The report reveals that in 1988 some 83 percent of all workers at corporations sponsoring health plans were eligible for participation. By 1997, that figure dropped to 75 percent. According to the EBRI the drop is attributable to the rise in part-time workers, the growth of temporary agencies, and utilization of independent contractors.

The total number of employees who participate in company-sponsored plans has also declined during the same 10-year period. In 1988, 68 percent of hourly and salaried workers were health plan participants. That rate fell to 62 percent in 1992 and remained steady through 1997.

The study reveals 40.6 million American workers did not have health insurance through their jobs in 1997. Of these, 45 percent were employed

by a firm that did not offer benefits; 33 percent, who were eligible for coverage declined it; and 22 percent were at companies who sponsored a plan but were ineligible for participation.

A key finding in the study was that of the 13.7 million employees who were offered insurance but declined coverage, 20 percent answered that participation in the plan was too costly.

Quebec public sector unions threaten general strike

A union alliance representing 315,000 Quebec public sector workers is threatening to mount a two-day strike next month and a general strike beginning November 18.

"There is a real threat that a great disorder happens this fall," Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) Vice President Claudette Charbonneau told a press conference last week. "The November 18 date is an absolute deadline."

The Quebec public sector workers—who include public school and college teachers, school support staff, and hospital workers and technicians—have been without contracts since June 30, 1998. Their unions, the CNTU, the Quebec Federation of Labour, and the Quebec Teachers Federation, have all been closely allied with Quebec's Parti Qu'Ébéc (PQ) government and have supported the PQ in its campaign to eliminate the provincial budget deficit by the year 2000 through brutal social spending cuts. Among the rank and file, however, there is growing opposition to both the government and the unions' corporatist program.

Earlier this summer, 47,000 nurses, members of a different union, the Quebec Federation of Nurses, mounted a militant three-week-long strike. The nurses' defiance of anti-strike laws and their defense of public health care evoked widespread popular support, but the QFN leadership joined hands with the government to strangle it.

Toronto city workers set to strike

Seven thousand City of Toronto outside workers, including paramedics and garbage collectors, have a Wednesday, September 15 strike deadline. The city is petitioning the Ontario Labor Relations Board to invoke Ontario's first contract arbitration clause so as to render a strike illegal and empower an arbitrator to determine the municipal workers' contract.

The chief issues in dispute are contracting out, wages and the harmonization of wages and working conditions in the newly-created mega-city.

These are the first contract negotiations since the City of Toronto was merged with five other municipalities in 1998. The annual salary gap between workers doing the same job, but who previously were employed by different municipalities, is as much as \$4,000. Several of the municipalities had contracted out garbage collection and in those areas private companies continue to perform work that elsewhere in Toronto is done by members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Most of the outside workers have not received a wage increase since 1991. The city is offering annual increases of 2 percent in a three-year contract.



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