

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 September 1999

El Salvador teachers protest

On Friday the main teachers union in El Salvador suspended a weeklong strike to “encourage negotiations,” even though Salvadoran President Francisco Flores insisted that the government does not have the means to pay for a raise.

Arnoldo Vaqueano, leader of the national teachers union ANDES, declared that half of the schools had been shut down by the strike. ANDES represents 18,000 of El Salvador's 30,000 teachers.

The teachers, who make between \$374 and \$595 a month, are demanding a 20 percent wage increase.

Ecuador conference plans “Cry of the Excluded”

On September 17, a conference took place in Quito to plan activities for the “Cry of the Excluded,” part of a continent-wide series of demonstrations to confront IMF economic policies that have created widespread misery. Similar meetings are planned in Guayaquil and other major cities in Ecuador.

The demonstrations will take place in October in many Latin American and Caribbean countries. Other demands prioritize the needs of the impoverished masses over the debt payments to the international banks.

A recent World Bank document reports that the Latin American masses are true “citizens of poverty,” with 40 percent of Mexicans and 46 percent of Panamanians living on less than \$2 a day. Eleven percent of Venezuelans and 15 percent of Mexicans live on less than \$1 a day.

IAM sues Pratt & Whitney over restructuring

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 91 filed suit in US District Court September 16 hoping to secure court orders to block the jet-engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney from shifting work among its several plants around the United States.

In 1993 the IAM bureaucracy gave the company \$30 million in contract concessions in return for so-called job security guarantees. But in a restructuring plan

aimed at cutting costs, Pratt & Whitney announced August 12 it will move its military engine operations from West Palm Beach, Florida to Middletown and East Hartford, Connecticut. Other work from a North Haven, Connecticut plant will be shifted to East Hartford as well as plants in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

The IAM is insisting contract clauses bar the company from such a restructuring and obligate it to keep the New Haven plant open until December 2001. Pratt & Whitney said it is “well within the provisions of our contract and are prepared to argue our case before a judge.”

Flight attendants reject American Airlines contract

Flight Attendants at American Airlines rejected a four-year tentative agreement by an 11,895 to 4,358 margin. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA), an independent union, endorsed the agreement declaring it made its attendants the highest-paid in the industry.

But the 15.9 percent wage increase over four years combined with a 3 percent signing bonus did not blind rank-and-file opponents, who charged the agreement eliminated profit sharing and would increase the required number of hours per month each employee must work. APFA President Denise Hedges admitted the rejection “is a clear indication that flight attendants want more from their jobs. That is something that all airlines, not just American, have to come to grips with.” No new negotiations have been scheduled.

Teamsters bureaucracy disbands rank-and-file flight attendant committee

The executive board of Teamsters Local 2000, which represents 11,000 flight attendants at Northwest Airlines, voted 4-3 to disband the union's Contract Action Team (CAT). The CAT group, comprised of 25 rank-and-file volunteers scattered across Northwest's 10 base operations, initially helped Local 2000 garner an

overwhelming strike authorization vote as contract negotiations over the summer moved towards a conclusion.

But once a substandard tentative agreement was reached and endorsed by Local 2000 President Billie Davenport and Teamsters International President James Hoffa, CAT members used their knowledge of the contract deficiencies and the Internet to mobilize a resounding 69 percent no vote.

Davenport cited the costs of maintaining the CAT group along with the necessity of forming a strike-preparedness committee as reasons for ending support for CAT. Initially Davenport had agreed that the seven-member executive board would hold meetings with both elected flight attendant representatives as well as CAT members. But the recent board vote essentially blocks CAT participation. Flight attendants believe Davenport's proposal for a strike preparedness committee aims to jettison CAT members and bring on board others who can be trusted to toe the line of the Teamsters bureaucracy.

Local 2000 Secretary-Treasurer Danny Campbell, one of the board members who opposed CAT's disbanding and also refused to endorse the tentative agreement, has grown close to the rank-and-file committee. On one of the Internet chat groups he recently wrote, "If this program (CAT) is disbanded, or taken over by individuals who have not been part of it in the past, then it is very likely that the individuals who may run it will do so as a dictatorship which will only weaken membership involvement in it. Without membership involvement, we have nothing but a handful of union leaders."

Meanwhile, Campbell and Davenport along with the rest of the board members have agreed on a plan to carry out a survey of the union ranks before returning to negotiations tentatively scheduled for late October or early November.

Tentative agreement at Continental General Tire in North Carolina

The United Steelworkers (USW) union and Continental General Tire management reached a tentative agreement after a yearlong strike by 1,450 workers at the German-owned plant in Charlotte, North Carolina. Workers met September 19 to vote on the new long-running agreement that extends to the year 2006. No details of the contract were made available.

Workers initially struck September 20, 1998 at the expiration of the old three-year agreement when the company failed to provide sufficient increases to compensate workers for \$90 million in wage and benefit concessions made in 1995. Continental General responded by hiring replacement workers, security guards and setting up video surveillance equipment around the tire plant.

Similar contracts to the North Carolina agreement were also offered to workers at Continental General plants in Mayfield, Kentucky and Bryan, Ohio.

CAW and Ford Canada draw closer to settlement

Two days after declaring that there was only one chance in a thousand that a strike could be averted against Ford Motor Co. of Canada, Canadian Auto Workers President "Buzz" Hargrove commented Sunday that there was enough time "to put together a good settlement" without a walkout. The old contract expires midnight Tuesday.

Hargrove described Ford's first offer as "terrible" and the worst such he had ever seen. The company had offered its 13,000 Canadian workers a three-year deal with a 1 percent wage increase in each year, plus a one-time payment of \$500 (US\$338.55). The proposal came about 24 hours after DaimlerChrysler and the United Auto Workers in the US had tentatively agreed on a pact including annual wage increases of 3 percent and a signing bonus of \$1,350 (US).

A CAW strike would halt production of Windstar minivans manufactured in Oakville, Ontario and full-sized sedans made in St. Thomas, Ontario. A walkout at Ford Canada's engine plant in Windsor, Ontario would cause the most damage. One auto industry analyst described the Windsor plant as "one of the most important engine plants in the world." The facility produces many of the engines for the new Excursion sport utility vehicle, expected to produce \$15,000 in profits per vehicle.



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