

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 September 1999

Haitian health workers strike

Over the last two weeks, Haitian nurses, aides and other public health workers throughout the country have been on strike for a raise and better working conditions. The workers are demanding a 60 percent pay raise, better supplies and modern equipment to improve patient care for the poor, for whom these public health facilities are the only alternative. It is common for people to leave the hospital because they find no one to help them.

Public nurses in Haiti earn the equivalent of US\$500 per month, and aides earn \$300. Haiti spends 3.2 percent of its national budget on health. Despite the dire need, the government has declared there is no money for raises.

Peruvian women march to demand better cafeterias

Over 15,000 women members of the "Glass of Milk Food Program" (PAVL), the Popular Cafeterias (CP) and the Wawawasi of Peru, many carrying their infant children, marched on Congress on September 22, to demand better public cafeterias. A spokesperson for the National Food Program washed his hands of the whole affair, telling the women that each municipality handles its own food program.

Drought victims protest in Brazil

Over 100,000 victims of a severe drought affecting the State of Pernambuco marched in Sao Paulo and blocked city streets to demand government aid. Pernambuco's Federation of Agricultural Workers organized the march, which also drew support from rural workers, public employees, students and members of other trade unions.

Manuel dos Santos, one of the march leaders, vowed to continue the protests, warning that tensions are so high that people are ready to begin looting supermarkets and stores. If that were to occur, the government would have to accept responsibility, the organizers said.

Pernambuco is located in northern Brazil. Its crops of manioc, sugar, coffee and cattle have been heavily damaged by the drought. The drought is also affecting the southern states of Minas Gerais and Espirito Santo. In those states, the Cardoso government is distributing five kilograms of beans to thousands of affected families.

"People's March" against IMF policies converging on Brasilia

The 1,100 people in the "People's March," which began on July 26 in Rio de Janeiro, will reach the Brazilian capital of Brasilia on October 7. When completed, they will have marched 1,400 kilometers. Presently they are in the state of Goias and have crossed the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. As they passed through scores of towns and cities, the marchers held meetings on the growing unemployment and poverty created by the IMF-backed policies of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

Organizing the protest are the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), the Central Organization of Popular Movements (CMP), the National Bishops Conference and many other rural, trade union and women's organizations. Another march called the "Cry of the Excluded" is also being organized.

Bolivian teachers stage 24-hour strike

The Bolivian teachers unions carried out a 24-hour strike September 24, marching and blocking the main streets of La Paz. The teachers are opposing a government slander campaign against them. Union leader

Vilma Plata said government denunciations of the teachers were "to pave the way for mass firings." The union is demanding the ouster of Education Minister Tito Hoz de Vila. Plata said that the minister is using the violation and murder of an eight-year-old girl in a public school to discredit teachers. "The government's aim is to fire career teachers and replace them with members of its political parties. This will cause severe damage to education, to children and to young people," she said.

Public transit strike in Paraguay

On September 24, transit workers brought the Paraguayan capital of Asuncion to a standstill. Over a million passengers were affected by the strike. Army vehicles were commissioned to pick up hundreds of people waiting at major transfer points. This was the first protest against the government of President Luis Gonzales Macchi, who took power last March.

Ninety percent of the drivers (about 6,000) struck for 24 hours, demanding an eight-hour day, salaries according to labor law and regular social security contributions. Mass transit was privatized in Paraguay 40 years ago, and service is considered one of the worst in the continent. The employers have found paying noncompliance fines more profitable than obeying labor laws.

Authorities acknowledged that Asuncion had been totally paralyzed and claimed that they were working toward a resolution. But the drivers union walked out of negotiations with employers and the government, denouncing the government's "phony promises." The union is demanding tougher legislation against the owners.

Banana workers protest layoffs in Costa Rica

Hundreds of banana workers marched on September 20 in San Jose, capital of Costa Rica. They were protesting an agreement between the government and Costa Rican and foreign banana growers that will allow employers to fire workers and rehire them at lower wages.

Many workers wore masks and carried signs explaining that they would be fired if they revealed their faces. The march began in front of the Bandeco transnational, also known as Del Monte, one of the companies that lobbied hardest for this "reform."

The workers questioned the constitutionality of the legislation and denounced the morality of cutting their wages when growers are enjoying hefty profits. In Costa Rica, as in most of Latin America, employers are not legally allowed to lay workers off "at will," but rules are often ignored.

The growers, however, claim that this is a much needed structural reform that will allow them to confront the overproduction of bananas in Costa Rica. They are calling for "shared sacrifices" on all sides. The banana industry employs about 50,000 workers in Costa Rica. So far 2,000 workers have been laid off.

Supermarket workers strike in Alabama

Seven thousand workers at Bruno Inc. stores in Alabama walked out for the first time in the company's 40-year history September 26. The statewide strike came one day after workers rejected the company's contract offer and threats by top management that a walkout would be "catastrophic."

The workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union, want their jobs to be guaranteed if the supermarket chain, which is

struggling to emerge from Chapter 11 bankruptcy, is sold or merged. Management claims it has no plans to sell or merge the company and that it is prepared to call in managers to keep the stores open during a walkout.

Unions at US Air, Delta reach tentative agreements

The International Association of Machinists reached a tentative agreement with US Airways Group September 21, averting a strike by 7,000 mechanics and cleaners that would have paralyzed the nation's sixth largest airline. No details were released about the deal, which members still must ratify.

Last July mechanics voted down a tentative three and a half year agreement endorsed by the IAM leadership. In August the National Mediation Board, the government agency responsible for labor relations in the airline industry, declared the parties at an impasse and released them into a 30-day "cooling off" period which expired September 25.

Meanwhile, the pilots union reached a tentative agreement with Delta Air Lines that would provide the industry's highest pay rates to its Boeing 777-200 pilots, set pay rates for the new Boeing 767-400ER, and give most pilots an early 3 percent raise. The deal also reportedly eliminates the hated "B-scale" system, which pays junior pilots less than their counterparts for the same work. Pilots, who made concessions in 1996, have been demanding that the highly profitable airline compensate them. The pact with the nation's third largest airline must be ratified by 9,000 members of the Air Line Pilots Association.

Detroit teachers ratify contract

Detroit teachers Friday ratified a three-year contract that provides pay raises of at least 6.1 percent in exchange for granting school authorities greater freedom to close "failing" schools and fire "nonperforming" teachers. Earlier this month 7,700 teachers struck for nine days to oppose the school board's "reform" policies and to fight for smaller class sizes, higher wages to attract qualified teachers and more supplies. The strike started in opposition to the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) proposal to extend the old contract.

After a concerted effort by the DFT and national union officials to end the strike, backed by Mayor Dennis Archer and the news media, teachers voted to return to work pending the ratification of the new agreement. The contract was ratified by a 3-to-1 margin, with 8,500 of the union's 11,500 members voting.

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School authorities made a token concession to the teachers' demands for smaller class sizes by approving reductions in 44 out of the district's 260 schools over the next three years. School CEO David Adamany has also said he will seek to impose his plan for merit pay—widely opposed by teachers—without the union's approval.

United Auto Workers cuts off strike pay to locked-out Kentucky workers

Last month officers of United Auto Workers Local 2036 in Henderson, Kentucky were informed by the UAW International Executive Committee that they would no longer be provided with strike pay for 400 union members locked out by Accuride Corp. Local 2036 President Billy Robinson called a special meeting to inform members of the decision and to see, if after 19 months on the picket line, the membership wanted to cave in to the company's demands. Accuride wants to establish an open shop, which would allow some workers to stay out of the union. Kentucky is a "right-to-work" state that allows open shops.

One locked-out worker said the overwhelming sentiment towards the company's so-called offer was: "Your proposal is not worth considering and we will continue to resist your demands, even without the UAW's financial help."

Workers are maintaining picket lines and have received support from other locals. Dan Nunn, who has sent out an e-mail appeal to 200 unions across the country, wrote, "This type of action by the International union

is unheard of and will set organized labor back many years.... The UAW is now attempting to do what Accuride could not do in 19 months—starve us out." Nunn told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The International no longer considers our local profitable. They have a dollars and cents attitude."

Consolidated Paper workers set to strike

Nearly 3,000 workers at Consolidated Paper's central Wisconsin plant are set to strike Friday if no agreement is reached between the company and the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (PACE). The company has threatened to continue its operations with management employees and by shifting production to unaffected facilities.

Workers have been working without a new contract since last May. Earlier this month PACE officials brought back a proposal, but rank-and-file workers overwhelmingly rejected it. On September 16 paperworkers authorized a strike if no agreement were reached by this Friday. The union has now joined management in seeking the intervention of a federal mediator for talks scheduled before the strike deadline.

Toronto Symphony Orchestra musicians strike

In their first strike in 76 years, musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra packed up their instruments, formed a picket line and provided music outside the concert hall on Saturday, September 25. Their picket signs read, "World Class City deserves a World Class Orchestra."

A major issue in the strike is the large wage disparity between musicians in Toronto and other metropolitan areas, such as Montreal and New York. Violist Gary Labovitz, who leads negotiations, explained that in 1992 Toronto performers were making \$3,000 less than the New York Philharmonic. Today they are making \$35,000 less. Labovitz explained that low salaries make it difficult to maintain good musicians or attract new ones.

Members ratify Canadian Auto Workers pact with Ford

Canadian Auto Workers members approved the deal reached by the union and Ford during ratification votes taken Sunday, September 26. The contract was approved by a 94 percent margin, but only 4,923 out of 13,330 eligible CAW members voted. The agreement includes salary and cost-of-living increases of 4.5 percent in each of its three years along with a one-time signing bonus and improved pension benefits. Ford has agreed to pay \$2,800 (US\$1,898) a month to workers who retire with 30 years of service before age 60.

In exchange for what amounts to a buyout for older workers, the CAW agreed to a series of concessions to increase productivity and slash jobs. CAW President Basil "Buzz" Hargrove acknowledged that the union would not oppose Ford's plans to introduce so-called modular assembly methods. This will allow the company to sharply reduce its work force in assembly plants by having outside suppliers, with predominantly lower-paid and in some cases nonunion workers, produce large numbers of parts in one assembled unit or module.

According to Hargrove, under the CAW-Ford deal workers would continue their work and follow it to the supplier. "The industry can restructure, but they cannot do it at the expense of the work force," Hargrove declared. CAW officials hope the presence of higher-paid employees in the supplier plants might aid their efforts in organizing these factories and slow the fall in dues-paying membership. The CAW has already demonstrated that it is willing to accept substandard wages and conditions for parts workers as long as they pay union dues.

Like the UAW at DaimlerChrysler, the CAW was able to get a neutrality letter from Ford promising not to interfere with union organizing drives at its nonunionized suppliers. "Ford will respect the role the union plays in the industry," Hargrove said.

Negotiations are now taking place between the CAW and DaimlerChrysler, with General Motors to follow.



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