

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 October 1999

## Mexican sugar and fruit workers strike

The National Union of Sugar Workers (SNIA) is carrying out a national strike against the Sugar Industry, affecting Mexico's 162 sugar mills. On Friday workers in the states of Sinaloa and Veracruz joined the walkout. The workers are demanding a 2 percent bonus, that payments to the pension fund be made current, and an end to the delays in the construction of workers' housing.

Meanwhile, on September 27, the Mexican courts ruled against the over two-month-long strike of the workers at Congeladora del Rio, a fruit processing plant in Irapuato, thus denying the strikers legal protection. Global Trading, a North American company, owns Congeladora del Rio. The union, the Authentic Workers Front (FAT), has called for international solidarity against the company and government's union-busting.

On July 15, 200 workers went on strike against a company-imposed pact, demanding the settlement of their long delayed contract. On September 17, the workers set up picket lines to press their demands. As the company hired scab labor, workers began a round-the-clock picket and sit-down protest.

In response to a letter-writing campaign from FAT and the Committee for Labor Rights, Global Trading President Arthur Price stated his support for the union-busting campaign by Congeladora and the Mexican government.

## Mexican students commemorate 1968 massacre

On Saturday, October 2 more than 10,000 students marched in Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 when government troops shot down 500 protesting students. The march stretched 1.5 kilometers, slowly progressing from University City, the campus of the Autonomous University (UNAM), to the Tlatelolco district, 20 kilometers away in Mexico City's downtown. Many of the marchers are also participating in the strike at UNAM against government plans to introduce tuition at the largely free university, which is in its sixth month.

The government has never explained the events of 31 years ago, refusing to release top secret documents. A recent book, based on the memoirs of General Garcia Barragan, then secretary of defense, confirms that the army was the first to fire on the students.

## October 12 march of Latin American peasants in Bolivia

Delegations of peasants from Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala and other Latin American nations will be joining a march of Bolivian peasants on October 12 to support their struggle against the government and landlords.

Bolivian peasant organizations from Santa Cruz organized the march to protest the landlords and the Agrarian Reform Institute, which have been stealing their land, and victimizing and brutalizing the peasants. Zimar Victoria of the Federation of Bolivian Peasants (CCB) indicated that the march will petition the government to respect its own laws.

## Uruguay: "Cry of the Excluded" march

Uruguayan workers and peasants will participate in a "Cry of the Excluded" march under a banner calling for "Work, Justice and Life" that will take place in the capital of Montevideo. On a day officially celebrated as Columbus Day in Latin America, these counter-festivities will protest the poverty and deplorable conditions caused by the government's

economic policies.

The demonstration emulates similar "Cry of the Excluded" marches that have taken place in Brazil during the past five years, drawing attention to the economic and political isolation suffered by the victims of the new economic policies. The International Monetary Fund has imposed draconian measures that have exacerbated the social divide within these countries. For the first time, these protests are being coordinated across the continent. The march organizers' demands combine the reactionary call for protectionist trade measures, along with demands for the repudiation of foreign debt and protection of social benefits.

## Puerto Rican workers protest US Marine Base

On Friday, Federico Torres Montalvo, president of the Amalgamation of Puerto Rican Workers, announced that Puerto Rico's unions will camp out at restricted beaches at the Marine Base on Vieques Island, escalating their campaign of civil disobedience. The teachers union has already set up camp on the one of the beaches. Residents and fishermen on the small island off Puerto Rico's coast have long protested against US weapons testing on Vieques.

## Protesting construction worker convicted of striking New York City police horse

James Hornacek, a 35-year-old electrician, was convicted September 24 for "attempting to kill or injure a police animal" during a June 30 demonstration by New York City construction workers. Hornacek was among several construction workers arrested after police attacked a demonstration of 20,000 workers who were protesting the use of a nonunion contractor by the Metropolitan Transit Authority.

According to a policeman who testified at the trial, the electrician stood his ground when the police horse approached him and then punched the animal in the nose.

Hornacek, who chose to go to trial instead of accepting a plea bargain that involved community service, was acquitted of the charge of obstructing governmental administration. Judge Ruth Pickholz of Manhattan Criminal Court will have until November 9 to sentence Hornacek, who could face up to 90 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

Last summer's protest surged out of control of the building trades union bureaucracy and blocked traffic for hours in midtown Manhattan. When police in riot gear tried to block the marchers from reaching the MTA headquarters, a violent clash erupted. Eighteen police and three civilians were reportedly injured, including a worker seriously hurt when he was kicked in the head by a police horse. Another 38 workers were arrested. Police used pepper spray and nightsticks on protesting workers. Scores of police vans were on the scene and helicopters circled overhead.

Enraged, workers chanted, "police state!" Scuffling and some bottle throwing ensued. A number of workers were arrested and then pepper-sprayed before being herded into police vans. Afterwards the crowd dispersed into small groups and began heading back to MTA headquarters, where they were again confronted by police. More workers were arrested and beaten. After the protest New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the *New York Times* and others denounced the "lawlessness" of the construction workers.

## Contract ratified at Consolidated Paper

Some 2,800 members of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and

Energy Workers International Union (PACE) in Wisconsin ratified a six-year contract with Consolidated Paper September 30, averting a possible strike scheduled for the following day.

The agreement passed by a 77 percent margin and calls for 3 percent increases in each year of a six-year contract. The first raise will bring the average rate to \$17.29 an hour. The previous contract expired on April 30 of this year. Workers rejected an initial offer recommended by the union leadership in early September and voted to strike if the company did not alter the package. The main sticking point in negotiations revolved around benefits. Complete details were unavailable, but one contract issue allowed for 100 percent medical coverage after out-of-pocket expenses reach \$1,650 per family or \$825 per individual. The rejected agreement had set the out-of-pocket limit at \$2,000 per family and \$1,000 per individual.

Consolidated Papers is North America's largest producer of coated printing papers and a major manufacturer of specialty papers for the printing and publishing industries. Overall the company employs about 6,800 workers and still has contracts to settle with the Office and Professional Employees International Union, the Machinists, Plumbers and Pipefitters and Electrical Workers. The company amassed \$102.4 million in profits on sales of \$2 billion last year.

#### **Kaiser Aluminum lockout passes one-year mark**

September 30 marked one year of the lockout by Kaiser Aluminum against 2,900 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) at plants in Spokane and Tacoma, Washington; Gramercy, Louisiana and Newark, Ohio. Kaiser has maintained operations with a combination of management personnel and replacement workers since the strike, while suffering \$93 million in losses in the three quarters since the strike began.

In its most recent offer Kaiser proposed a pay increase of \$3.13 and some slight benefit hikes in a five-year contract. But the major point separating the two sides is Kaiser's plan to eliminate 700 jobs at its plants. Kaiser also wants another 239 bargaining unit jobs to be reclassified and given to nonunion workers.

The USW bureaucracy, which has isolated the strikers for the past year, called plant gate rallies to mark the anniversary. Union officials are claiming to launch a campaign to end Seattle-based Boeing Company's use of Kaiser aluminum produced by replacement workers, which they say is of inferior quality.

#### **Alabama grocery strike enters second week**

The strike by 4,600 members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1657 against Bruno's Inc. food stores in Alabama entered its second week with no prospect for a resolution. The union and company sharply disagree on the number of workers crossing picket lines. At the same time it appears the strikers have won broad support from store patrons who are honoring picket lines by shopping elsewhere.

The strike, begun on September 26, is the first against Bruno in 40 years and affects some 108 grocery stores that run under the names Food World, Bruno's and Food Fair. Workers, who are seeking better compensation and benefits, are focused on getting a job security clause in the new contract. Bruno's, a Birmingham, Alabama-based company, was sold to Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. in 1995. The company went through two different management teams and in 1998 sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

#### **St. Louis bus drivers strike Laidlaw**

Teamsters Local 610, representing 400 school bus drivers in the St. Louis, Missouri area, went on strike September 29 against Laidlaw Transportation. Laidlaw, a giant corporation that provides busing service nationwide, provides a large percentage of the metro area's busing. Officials at Town and Country's Special School District reported that attendance was off 55 percent on the second day of the strike. The Teamsters rejected binding arbitration and the union and the company remain far apart on wages, bonuses and overtime.

#### **Northwest and new mechanics union meet**

The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) met with Northwest Airlines negotiators September 22 for preliminary contract discussions to "go over the location, time stipulations and rules both sides will adhere to at the bargaining table."

Nine AMFA locals representing 11,000 Northwest mechanics, cleaners and custodians from different locations throughout the country will exchange contract proposals in their first bargaining session in Minneapolis. Subsequent meetings will take place in other cities where Northwest has operations.

The union has made arrangements for 25 rank-and-file workers to be present at each negotiating session in order to observe the bargaining process. Workers will qualify for attending the sessions through a random drawing. AMFA won bargaining rights away from the International Association of Machinists (IAM) in a certification election last November. The election came as a result of a rebellion by workers against the IAM for endorsing a substandard contract that was soundly defeated by the rank and file. AMFA was ultimately certified last June by the National Mediation Board after the IAM challenged the results of the certification election.

#### **Doctors' clinic fires striking nurses in Minnesota**

The board of the Alexandria Clinic in west-central Minnesota used a technicality to fire 22 nurses last week in the first week of a strike. The struggle began in March of 1998 when more than 30 nurses at the clinic voted to join the Minnesota Licensed Practical Nurses Association. But after more than a year of fruitless negotiations an impasse was reached and the nurses voted on August 31 to strike.

The strike was set to begin with the expiration of a 10-day waiting period on September 10 at 8:00 a.m. But the nurses did not begin their strike until noon of that day. A lawyer representing the doctors on the clinic board has cited the four-hour delay as a violation of labor law that allowed management to carry out the firings.

The strike has caused an uproar in the local community. Most nurses only earn between \$8 and \$9 an hour, with the highest paid \$12.70. The clinic has bused strikebreakers in from the Twin Cities and is paying them \$20 an hour, plus lodging costs. Another 13 union nurses crossed picket lines, some of them citing their Christian fundamentalist beliefs for their reason for breaking ranks with striking nurses.

#### **United Auto Workers reportedly near settlement with Ford**

The United Auto Workers is reportedly near a settlement with Ford Motor Co. for a new four-year agreement covering 101,000 workers at its US plants. The deal is expected to closely follow the UAW's contract with DaimlerChrysler AG, General Motors and Delphi Automotive Systems, the parts company spun off by GM last May. These agreements give workers an annual increase of 3 percent a year for all four years, a \$1,350 signing bonus and improved cost-of-living adjustments.

The new contracts also pave the way for the Big Three US automakers to eliminate up to 38,000 assembly jobs over the next four years, including 21,000 at GM, 10,000 at Ford and 7,000 at DaimlerChrysler. A provision in the DaimlerChrysler contract, which is mirrored in the tentative agreement with GM, lets the companies reduce through attrition 10 percent of the 388,000-member workforce, and only fill every third vacancy. If attrition drops employment to 80 percent to 90 percent of the base employment level, the companies have to fill one of every two vacancies.

The *New York Times* reported Friday that Ford plans to spin off its Visteon auto parts division to shareholders and give wage and job guarantees to factory workers—the same steps GM took with Delphi. UAW officials, who have publicly opposed the spin-off, are expected to accept the deal, which will affect 23,500 UAW members. Visteon workers fear pay cuts, plant closures and fewer union jobs under an independent company.

The Delphi contract allows workers to transfer back to GM when

openings occur, and gives them until January 1 to retire with GM pensions. If Delphi goes out of business during the contract, the workers' layoff benefits would come from GM.

Workers are expected to complete voting by October 10 on the deals reached between the UAW and General Motors and Delphi. The companies are now turning their bargaining attention to the International Union of Electrical Workers. IUE contracts covering 6,000 GM workers and 20,000 Delphi workers, mostly in Ohio, expire November 15.

#### **Teamsters warehouse workers strike in Arkansas**

More than 300 warehouse workers are on strike in Tolleson, Arkansas at the Kroger-Fred Meyers-Fry's-C-S-I warehouse. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 104, are protesting against Kroger, which sold the warehouse and eliminated thousands of full-time positions. The workers want their jobs back, as well as wage and benefits packages.

#### **Canadian Auto Workers threaten strike against DaimlerChrysler plant**

The Canadian Auto Workers union has threatened to call a strike by 13,800 CAW workers midnight Tuesday at DaimlerChrysler Canadian plants if its nonunion parts supplier, Magna International Inc., continues to block the CAW from organizing the 550 workers at its Integram seating plant.

The union said it wants DaimlerChrysler Canada to force Magna to honor their employees' wishes, or move the work-in-house to another supplier. DaimlerChrysler's vice president of public and government affairs, Ottmar Stein, said, "We can't dictate to a company to change its policies on unions. This is workplace democracy." Magna is an important supplier to all the Big Three companies.

On taking power in 1995, Mike Harris's Tory government amended Ontario's labor code to abolish automatic union recognition if more than 50 percent of workers at a plant sign union cards.

The CAW and DaimlerChrysler have been meeting since last Tuesday. Both sides agree a settlement will be patterned on the three-year contract the union recently negotiated with Ford Motor Co. of Canada, which grants a 4.5 percent yearly raise in exchange for further assurances from the union to allow downsizing. The agreement also includes a "neutrality" pledge in relation to union organizing drives.

#### **Talks at a standstill between Inco and the United Steelworkers**

No formal talks have taken place between Canadian nickel miner Inco Ltd. and the United Steelworkers Union, which represents 1,000 of the company's workers in Thompson, Manitoba. Two weeks ago the union overwhelmingly rejected the company's final contract, which included a three-year wage freeze. Hours later the workers were locked out. The C\$1 billion Thompson operation produces 1 million pounds of nickel, equal to 4.5 percent of the world's production.



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