

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 October 1999

## Honduran high school teachers strike

About 12,000 high school teachers went on strike last Friday in Honduras to demand the payment of eight months' back wages. Alfonso Mendoza, a union spokesman, said that although the strike lasted only 48 hours, it could be extended indefinitely because of the government's inflexibility. In Honduras a high school teacher makes \$200 a month.

## Mass march against social crisis reaches Brazilian capital

On Friday thousands of men and women reached Brasilia, capital of Brazil, in a march that began July 26 in Rio de Janeiro, 1,500 kilometers away, to protest the social crisis. The enthusiastic marchers held signs demanding a more just society, the redistribution of land, and education and health services for all.

The mobilization was organized by *Consulta Popular (CP)*, an amalgamated organization that includes the Movement of Landless Rural Workers, the Bishops Conference and other social organizations. The CP intends to present Brazilian President Cardoso an action proposal to achieve their goals.

Cardozo has repudiated the protests, claiming that his regime conducts "silent work" to improve democracy. The latest polls indicate that 65 percent of the public opposes Cardozo.

## Bolivian workers to strike October 12 against Banzer government

Bolivian workers announced that they would carry out a 24-hour strike on October 12 against the economic policies of the Banzer government. The mobilization coincides with the 507th anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the continent.

The Bolivian Workers Federation (COB) stated that mass mobilizations were being planned in all cities and towns. The COB denounced the layoff of 120 sugar mill workers, calling it a "white massacre" against the workers. Their case will be raised on October 12, along with demands for labor stability.

## March for the homeless in Uruguay

October 4 was "International Homeless Day" in Uruguay. Throughout the country, where there are 200,000 homeless people, demonstrations were held defending the right to decent housing. In the capital of Montevideo an afternoon march called attention to the plight of the homeless in that city. The marchers also warned about the concentration of home building and apartment ownership in the hands of a few developers.

## Mexican sugar mill workers continue strike

Workers are on strike at 58 sugar mills in Mexico to demand back pay. According to the union, the workers are owed 116 million pesos (about \$11 million) and retirees have faced delays in their pension checks. The strikers are considering adding a wage demand, since the present contract expires in November.

The strike, which began on September 30, is threatening to cause

sugar shortages in parts of Mexico. This year's crop is to be harvested in November. Sugar mill owners deny that they owe as much as the unions say. They are demanding that the government legalize the strike.

## Chilean musicians protest

On Wednesday, October 6, striking musicians and ballet dancers of the Symphonic Orchestra of Santiago's Municipal Theater staged a musical protest through the streets of the capital. They demanded improved working conditions, drawing attention to the cultural industry's dire situation.

The musicians, who are required to work very long days, demanded wage increases and improved facilities. The artists are also demanding greater participation in artistic decisions. In Chile the monthly salary of a musician is less than \$2,000, a dancer less than \$1,300, and a technician only \$754.

## Week-long strike at WaWa convenience stores

Teamsters officials and management at WaWa Inc. were scheduled to meet with a federal mediator over the weekend in an effort to resolve the week-long strike against the convenience store chain's 510 facilities in the eastern US. Nearly 300 drivers and warehouse workers struck October 7 over pension rights and Sunday overtime pay.

WaWa has brought in strikebreakers while courts in Delaware and Pennsylvania have issued injunctions against Teamsters pickets. Stores are low on supplies as other Teamsters drivers are refusing to cross picket lines to stock shelves.

On Saturday five Teamsters were arrested by Pennsylvania State Police as they picketed and handed out leaflets at a rally in the Granite Run mall in Springfield. A Teamsters spokesman declared, "All we were trying to do was get information out. It's our First Amendment guarantee of free speech. We have a right to tell people our side without management setting the authorities on us."

## Teamsters and Overnite Transportation continue conflict over unionization

The Teamsters union announced that the National Labor Relations Board had dismissed several decertification attempts by Overnite Transportation last week. At the same time the company filed a defamation suit in Texas and another decertification in Minnesota.

Decertification suits in Cincinnati, Ohio; Memphis, Tennessee and Tupelo, Mississippi were either thrown out or blocked. The defamation suits were directed against the Teamsters and union spokesman David Cameron.

The flurry of activity comes as the Teamsters' four-year campaign to organize Overnite enters a critical stage. Last July an Unfair Labor Practices strike by 1,700 truck drivers and dock workers failed to result in a company-wide movement in favor of

the union. Recently the Teamsters revealed it was preparing a second strike. The Teamsters claim to represent 40 to 45 percent of Overnite's 8,200 employees involved in transportation and warehousing.

### **Bankruptcy filing cheats Milwaukee steelworkers out of paychecks**

Fifty former workers at Milwaukee's Steeltech corporation will be denied months of back wages and benefits they are owed because the company has filed for bankruptcy. Steeltech, a metal fabricator, was set up in 1990 in Milwaukee's inner city and had been trumpeted by local officials as a solution to the area's chronic unemployment and low-paying jobs. When the company filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy protection October 6, it emerged that the city was the largest creditor, holding \$5.9 million in bonds.

Under the bankruptcy laws Steeltech's creditors must first be paid before their employees see a dime. "If Steeltech has any cash at all, it won't go to the employees because of the debts that are owed to the secured creditors," said David Erne, a Milwaukee bankruptcy lawyer. One Steeltech employee worked for months without a paycheck and was supposed to have received \$9,000 in wages and \$4,000 under state labor laws. Despite violation of rules under the state Wage Payment Collection Act, the bankruptcy filing precludes the state from taking action against the company.

### **Machinists ratify contract at US Airways**

Some 7,500 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) approved a labor agreement with US Airways ending a strike threat against the nation's sixth-largest airline. Workers ratified the proposal by a 74 percent margin.

The five-year contract offers a 6 percent immediate wage increase along with a partial retroactive pay bonus. In the fourth year another bonus kicks in. The agreement contains a pay formula referred to as "parity plus 1 percent," which the union claims will keep US Airways machinists' and cleaners' pay in line with those at other airlines. But the agreement falls short of the union's original demand of an immediate 4 percent wage increase followed by 4 percent wage hikes in each year of the contract.

The union gave management the right to hire part-time cleaners to cover one-third of the daytime and afternoon shifts. US Airways had pushed for the unlimited right to hire part-timers. The contract stipulates that no full-time worker can be forced into the part-time category and that part-timers will be subject to layoffs before full-timers.

The ratification came after four years of drawn out negotiations. In July, union members rejected a contract reached by the IAM and management. US Airways President and CEO Rakesh Gangwal called the agreement "a major milestone on our path toward shedding our noncompetitive cost structure." US Airways still faces continued negotiations with the flight attendants union which has been without a contract since 1995.

### **American Trans Air, flight attendants call for mediation**

American Trans Air and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) agreed to apply to the National Mediation Board to oversee talks between the two sides that have bogged down over pay compensation and the company's desire to take away portions of the union's healthcare benefits.

The 1,400 AFA members are seeking to hike wages up to

industry standards and increase their present healthcare package. No details are available concerning the gap between union and management positions.

If talks break down under mediation, the Railway Labor Act provides for a 30-day cooling off period after which the union may strike if no agreement is reached. The AFA has been negotiating with America Trans Air since August 1998.

### **Quebec truckers continue protest**

Independent truckers in Quebec resumed pressure tactics Monday, despite a court injunction ruling continuation of their week-long blockade of many of the province's highways illegal. To protest soaring gas prices, poor working conditions and a government decision that they do not have the right to form a trade union, the truckers have limited traffic on many highways to one lane or instituted go-slows.

In a series of strategy meetings on Sunday, the close to 2,000 truckers voted to defy the injunction issued Friday. "In 25 years of union involvement," said a union official, "I have never seen a situation where people are in such a state of distress and despair."

### **Toronto Symphony Orchestra members in third week of strike**

The 94-member Toronto Symphony Orchestra and 100 support staff members have entered the third week of a strike for wage parity with orchestras in major US cities.

The musicians rejected a proposed three-year contract, saying that it would leave them with salaries \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year less than fellow orchestra members in major centers, such as New York and Philadelphia. In 1992 the TSO musicians accepted a 16 percent wage cut.

### **Construction trades workers protest asbestos exposure**

Construction workers at Quebecor's PE&E plant in Toronto are refusing to work in areas of the plant where they are exposed to asbestos dust. The company has demanded workers return to work, and has refused to do a safety audit despite weeks of workers' complaints. Adding to the workers' concerns are news reports of scores of deaths among production and construction workers at the former Holmes Foundry in Sarnia, where there was significant exposure to asbestos dust.



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