

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 October 1999

Colombian public employees strike

On October 14, education, health and state workers began a national strike, marching along the streets of Bogota, Medellin, Barranquilla, Cali, Barrancabermeja and Bucaramanga. On Friday, health workers reached a deal with the government and returned to work, but teachers and others continued their strike.

The workers are fighting against a plan to freeze the wages of 60 percent of all state workers for one year. According to Nelly Moreno, leader of the public employees union, under conditions of Colombia's inflation rate a freeze is equivalent to a severe wage reduction.

General strike in the Dominican Republic

On October 12 a general strike swept across the Dominican Republic in response to government-imposed increases in the price of gasoline, propane and other fuels. These increases have led transit companies to raise fares by 50 percent. The next day, unions and social organizations vowed to continue the strike indefinitely. So far the protests have resulted in one death and a thousand arrests.

President Leonel Fernandez said that fuel taxes had to be increased by 16 to 34 percent to pay the country's \$4 billion debt to the international banks. The Bishop of Santo Domingo denounced the strike as "irresponsible."

Agricultural strike in Paraguay

Angry farmers throughout Paraguay blocked major roads with their tractors and heavy machinery on October 12 to demand the resolution of their bank debt. The strike ended the next day after President Luis Gonzales Macchi promised them debt relief.

Some 200,000 members of the Coordinating Organization for Agricultural Reactivation (CRA) participated in the strike. CRA leader Agustin Konrad declared that without bank loans the farmers would not be able to plant next year's crops. Paraguay exports cotton, soy flour, leather, vegetable oils, lumber and other agricultural products. Macchi assured the strikers that he would channel \$169 million to the state-owned Development Bank, which deals with the agricultural sector.

Honduran Indian protesters attacked

Five thousand Indians and peasants marched in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa on October 14 to denounce the government's plans to sell their Atlantic coastal lands to foreign tourist interests. Police savagely attacked them, wounding at least 24 people.

Eyewitnesses reported that police shot at and used teargas against the protesters, many of whom were also beaten. At the time of the incident, the marchers were congregating in front of the government house. The government of Carlos Flores suspended two police officers and refused to halt the sale.

Haitian health workers strike

Resident doctors and lab technicians of the State University Hospital in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti's capital, have been on strike since October 7 for a raise and better working conditions. On October 13, student interns also joined them. "Without them [the residents] we cannot work because we are students," said one of the strikers.

In addition, public schools have been shut down since October 4 by a teachers strike. The teachers said that the government has renegeed on an agreement to improve their wages and schools. Critics charge that the government has made empty promises to the unions while working with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to cut back on the public sector.

Peruvian workers strike against Fujimori

Tens of thousands of Peruvian workers, students and retirees mobilized in every city across the country against a possible third candidacy for President Alberto Fujimori. The strike paralyzed the southern cities of Cuzco, Arequipa, Puno, Tacna, Ayacucho and Huancayo. Unions organized the protest, with thousands rallying in front of the congress and presidential palace in the capital city of Lima. Many were wounded by police sent in to attack the demonstrators.

Immigration service backs union-busting in Minneapolis

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) arrested four Latino women and two men at the Holiday Inn Express in Minneapolis October 13 after being tipped off by management that the workers were without proper documentation.

The Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 17 union charges that management was aware of the lack of documentation but only acted after the workers became active in a union organizing effort at the hotel and were members of the negotiating committee.

The Holiday Inn Express has been operating for the past 18 months, paying its 20 workers substandard wages. In August the union was narrowly voted in and contract negotiations were scheduled to get under way November 9.

Court postpones action against pickets in Wawa Food Stores strike

The Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia County rejected a request by Wawa Food Stores to amend a judge's order and limit the number of pickets to one per store. The 268 drivers and warehouse workers from Wawa's dairy and distribution center went on strike after their contract expired September 30 and have been picketing and handing out handbills to customers at Wawa's convenience stores in the Philadelphia area.

Judge Mary Collins requested management and negotiators for Teamsters Local 463 to appear before her in an attempt to restart contract talks. The strike was in part provoked over Wawa's

demand to take away premium pay on Sunday. Previous contract language stipulates that drivers who work more than four hours on Sunday will receive overtime pay for the entire shift.

The Teamsters filed two separate charges with the National Labor Relations Board. One charges unfair labor practices against the company over attempts to induce employees to withdraw from the union. Another is against the Simon Realty Group for its part in provoking an altercation with pickets at the Granite Run mall.

Lockout at Alabama sheet metal plant

The United Steelworkers (USW) and officials at the Scottsboro Aluminum rolling mill in Alabama continue to dispute whether the work stoppage that has idled the plant's 430 union members was a strike or a work stoppage.

The workers' contract expired October 10. The union is charging that the company locked out its employees and hired 60 strikebreakers. In a letter to union workers the company said, "We recognize that employees have the right to strike—the decision to continue the strike is up to you. We have not locked out our employees, and we hope you will choose immediately to come to work." The USW took no strike vote and had offered to continue negotiations after the contract's expiration.

Scottsboro, which produces 399 million pounds per year of mill-finished and painted sheet products, was bought out last March by the Chicago-based investment group Michigan Avenue Partners from Norandal, the US subsidiary of Canadian firm Noranda.

Maryland court may order Giant Food workers to pay back unemployment benefits

Some 1,300 workers at Giant Food may be ordered by a Maryland Court of Appeals to repay \$1.5 million in unemployment insurance received during a two-month strike that started in December 1996. The court ruling reasons that since there was a "stoppage of work" the strikers were not entitled to unemployment pay. Unions representing the workers argued that since the company continued production during the strike there was no work stoppage.

Negotiations aimed at averting Canadian Auto Workers strike at General Motors

The Canadian Auto Workers and General Motors appear to be getting close to a deal to avert a strike by 22,000 GM workers, scheduled for Wednesday morning. GM has dropped plans to transfer work at five Canadian plants to outside suppliers that threatened 700 jobs, but the company is continuing plans to close its St. Therese, Quebec assembly plant in the next few years. CAW President Buzz Hargrove has offered to allow modular assembly methods to keep the Quebec plant open. Such methods, which involve suppliers assembling many components into modules that are put together at assembly plants, would mean the destruction of hundreds if not thousands of jobs.

A contract with GM is expected to closely model three-year agreements already reached with Ford and DaimlerChrysler AG. Those include a 3 percent annual wage increase, a C\$1,000 signing bonus and improved retirement benefits. Like their American counterparts in the United Auto Workers union, the CAW has accepted contracts that will improve wages for older workers who are nearing retirement, while paving the way for further downsizing of the North American auto industry.

To punish locked out miners, Inco Ltd. threatens to cut funding to Manitoba community

In the midst of a lockout of 1,000 workers at mining giant Inco Ltd., residents of the city of Thompson, Manitoba may be facing a 140 percent tax increase to offset a grant loss, if Inco decides to remove its \$C7.5 million annual grant. The company has had a tight grip on the community since a 1956 agreement, which enabled Inco, the city's largest employer, to pay an annual grant for local development in-lieu of tax payments. Should the grant be completely eliminated, the city could only levy the base tax rate of just under \$1 million. Inco's Manitoba division turned a \$20 million pre-tax profit last year, but since nickel prices have almost doubled in the last nine months profits are expected to be considerably higher for 1999.

The labor dispute has entered its second month since Local 6166 of the United Steel Workers of America rejected the company's demand for a three-year wage freeze. Workers recently turned down a signing bonus of \$3,000 and improvements to a profit-sharing formula tied to the price of nickel. The union says that workers at the plant have sacrificed 400 jobs and money through restructuring in order to help the company become more competitive. It is asking for a 4 to 6 percent wage increase and pension benefits in parity with Inco workers in Sudbury, Ontario.

Bob Desjarlais, president of Steelworkers Local 6166, said that Inco is losing about \$1 million a day due to the lockout and that it would have cost only 10 days of production to pay for the union's wage demands.

Meanwhile, Sudbury Locals 6500 and 6600 have handed in 556 applications for a recent early retirement offer to the Inco Sudbury division. Last year, after workers were threatened with layoffs, the Steelworkers negotiated joint participation in a co-design plan with Inco to reduce operating costs. Steelworkers Area Coordinator Wayne Fraser said, "Once this dispute [in Thompson, Manitoba] is settled, we would be willing to continue in the redesigning of our workplaces, and would use our share of the savings to pay for additional early retirement applicants. It's good for the company, the union and the community to let these people retire when they're ready."



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