

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 October 1999

Union leaders terrorized in Guatemala

The Campaign for Labor Rights has issued an urgent call for international solidarity to defend Del Monte banana workers in Guatemala. On October 13 leaders of the SITRABI banana workers union in Morales, Guatemala were forced to resign and expelled from their homes under death threats by about 200 armed men. They were leading the fight against Del Monte's firing of nearly 1,000 workers.

The UN agency MINUGUA described the incident as the most serious violation of human rights in Guatemala since the killing of Archbishop Juan Jose Gerardi. There is evidence to suggest that this was an act of a paramilitary death squad, acting with the knowledge of the Guatemalan National Police, Del Monte and the business community.

The union leaders remain in fear for their lives and have asked for urgent international action in their defense and in the defense of the 3,000 banana workers who remain on or near the plantations. They have also called on Del Monte Fresh Produce to ensure their safety, immediately reject the forced resignations, respect the union contract and reinstate the fired workers.

The Campaign for Labor Rights is appealing for messages of protest to be sent to the Guatemalan Embassy in Washington and to Del Monte. For more information, please email CLR@igc.org.

Bolivians fighting high cost of living

On Tuesday, October 19 a general strike hit Bolivia to protest high living costs. In the capital of La Paz, members of community groups blocked main avenues and fought the police. The strikers called for an end to fuel increases, increases in the costs of public services, and lower taxes.

Nicaraguan workers to "March for Life"

The Nicaraguan National Workers Front (FNT) is organizing regional meetings to prepare a "March for Life" in November. Organizers say that the march is being held to oppose the government's plans to privatize all basic services in Nicaragua. These policies are in accordance with conditions set by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The FNT is demanding a general wage increase for all workers and freedom to organize. It also rejects the government's so-called reforms to the national pension system.

A broader goal of the march is to expose to the world the conditions of life of Nicaraguan workers and to "awaken hope for a better future."

Venezuelan president denounces public sector strike

Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's populist president, denounced the thousands of public employees who marched to protest his policies. The workers are demanding the payment of back wages and are set to strike next week. The workers say that they are owed almost \$4 billion since 1997 and that a 20 percent raise approved in May has yet to take effect.

Chavez, who is in Singapore on an official visit, threatened the

public workers, "I am not afraid to fight, so come on. I love a street fight." He claimed that the protests are being politically orchestrated by his opponents.

Teamsters launch another strike against Overnite

The Teamsters union struck Overnite Transportation Company October 24 at its terminal in Memphis as the first move in what they project to be a company-wide unfair labor practices strike. Pickets were also rumored to be setting up in Illinois, Kentucky and La Vergne, Tennessee. The move follows a previous failed attempt earlier this year to spark a company-wide strike.

The Teamsters have been seeking a contract with Overnite for four years. Presently they claim to represent 40 to 45 percent of the company's 8,000 drivers and dockworkers at 37 terminals. Overnite, a subsidiary of Union Pacific, has 160 terminals in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

Strike by Hawaiian dockworkers averted

The union representing Hawaii's dockworkers agreed to a tentative agreement with four shipping companies only days after a 100 percent turnout of the 507 members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 142 voted to strike.

The contract expired on June 30 but the ILWU agreed to extend talks until slowdowns by the workforce brought down a court order against the union. Evidently unable to restrain the workers, the union terminated the contract extension as a way of avoiding judicial reprisals.

The threat of a strike led to a massive hoarding of food by Hawaiians as 90 percent of all its goods arrive by ship. In 1949 a strike crippled the docks for five months and again for 100 days in 1971.

Workers are not only venting their anger against the shipping companies. While details are not known, the ILWU bureaucracy made concessions to the company that reverberated among the rank and file. "The last three negotiations, we gave some concessions," said Nate Lum, chairman of the union negotiating committee. "Our members weren't too happy ... but we did what was right."

Hawaiian dockworkers were seeking a 8 percent wage increases over three years, in line with wage hikes received by West Coast ILWU members in August.

Northwest flight attendants prepare for new negotiations

Northwest Airlines flight attendants have taken measures to prepare for a strike in the wake of the debacle suffered by the Teamsters Local 2000 bureaucracy when union members voted by 69 percent to reject the recent tentative agreement.

The union's executive board, elected representatives at NWA's 10 bases, and the Contract Action Team which mobilized against the recent contract voted unanimously to approve HAVOC (Having A Voice in Our Contract). HAVOC consists of an expansion of the contract goals contained in the rejected contract along with union assessments and a temporary increase in union dues that would raise

\$200,000 for a "Strike Hostage Fund." The fund is meant to defend flight attendants against retaliatory actions by Northwest Airlines that are expected if the union chooses to only engage in work stoppages by small teams of attendants against targeted flights. Northwest could also respond with a lockout against the entire workforce.

Anger of the flight attendant ranks has been directed against Local 2000 President Billie Davenport with calls for her resignation. Davenport claimed, "The second time around I'm not going to sell the flight attendants short. There's no doubt in my mind that we could be looking at a strike."

This comes at a time when Northwest has suffered financial losses and is mounting a struggle to drive off competition from Sun Country at its hub bases. Northwest also faces negotiations with its mechanics. Angered at the betrayals of the International Association of Machinists, the mechanics voted in a new union—the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association.

Alabama mill rejects steelworkers' return to work offer

Scottsboro Aluminum rejected an offer by the United Steelworkers (USW) to return to work under the old expired contract after two weeks on the picket line. Some 430 workers were locked out after the contract expired October 11. The Alabama mill brought in 60 strikebreakers and is presently attempting to recruit another 100 temporary replacement workers to maintain uninterrupted production. The company has also requested the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service to set up new negotiations with the USW. Scottsboro Aluminum is one of the largest aluminum rolling mills in the United States.

Flight attendants ratify contract at Alaskan Airlines

Two thousand members of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) accepted a four-year agreement with Alaska Airlines that purports to better wages, pensions and work rules, although no details have been released. Alaska Airlines cited the cordiality between union and management. Four years ago the AFA launched rolling strikes in a bitter contest that dragged on for years. In May a contract was concluded with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association after slowdowns cancelled flights and resulted in the firing of six workers.

Delta workers vote for union

The Transport Workers Union said it narrowly won an election to represent 107 pilot ground-training instructors at Delta Air Lines. It was the first successful union drive at the airline in decades. The company is the least unionized of the major carriers, and its management had fought hard to defeat the organizing effort among the pilot ground-training instructors.

Municipal workers in Nova Scotia walk off the job

Bus drivers, street workers and garbage collectors began a strike October 25 in Cape Breton Regional Municipality in a dispute involving job security. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents the 356 workers, is opposing plans by the Sydney city administration to eliminate jobs through contracting out to privatize companies. "It's as if we've come up against a brick wall," union spokeswoman Jackie Bramwell said Sunday, following a two and a half hour meeting with city negotiators. "We tried to go everywhere they wanted to go. All I can say is for whatever reason they're pushing a strike."

Sydney Mayor David Muise blamed the city's \$12 million deficit, saying, "In this economy and financial situation, we can't [assure] no contracting out and job security. There's 28 layoffs for November 1 and it could be 128 next year."

Meanwhile the Nova Scotia government is using legislation to

prevent a province-wide strike by paramedics over wages and working hours. The government is imposing binding arbitration on contract talks between the paramedics and their private sector employer.

GM workers ratify contract

GM workers voted Sunday night to approve a three-year contract patterned on recent agreements reached between the Canadian Auto Workers and DaimlerChrysler and Ford. The contract was approved by an 80 percent margin by workers at GM's Ontario operations in Windsor, St. Catharines, Oshawa, London and Woodstock, and in Ste. Therese, Quebec.

Under the deal the 22,500 workers will get a salary increase of 4.5 percent a year and pension improvements designed to encourage retirements. The CAW abandoned its demand for a commitment from GM to build a new vehicle at the Ste. Therese plant, which is scheduled to shut down in the fall of 2002, eliminating 1,200 jobs.

Toronto public workers vote 97 percent in favor of strike

The Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, representing 20,000 Toronto inside workers, have voted 97 percent in favor of authorizing union leaders to call a strike if talks fail. The local, which consists of 10,000 full-time and 10,000 part-time, public health and welfare workers, clerical staff and building inspectors as well as various other support staff, have been without a contract since December of 1997 and haven't seen a wage increase since 1992. The local also includes 1,600 who work in nursing homes, but are considered essential workers and not allowed to strike.

Anne Dubas, president of Local 79, said that the city is reducing job security and benefits, including the workers' prescription drug plan. The union said the city is offering its employees the same drug plan as participants in the province's workfare program, Ontario Works.

Negotiations are continuing with the aid of a provincial conciliator.

Quebec public workers unions call off general strike

A general strike by a common front of Quebec public unions has been cancelled after 350,000 teachers, nurses, support staff and civil servants displayed a clear vote of non-confidence in their union leadership, with more than two-thirds of union members voting against a strike. Plans for a 24-hour walkout on Monday, and a strike on November 18, have both been called off. The unions were demanding the improvement of a 5 percent wage hike to 11.5 percent.

While there has been widespread anger over the Bouchard government's program of budget cutting, the no vote was influenced by the experience in the 23-day nurses strike last summer, when union officials betrayed the nurses' fight for better wages and working conditions. Workers' unions have not only offered no viable way forward, but have in fact aided the Parti Quebecois government in its budget reductions.



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