

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 November 1999

Protest in Ecuador against foreign debt

The declaration: "*presupuesto 2000 todo para el pueblo, nada para la deuda*" (Year 2000 budget, all for the people, nothing towards the debt") was the title of a petition handed to Congress by social organizations in Ecuador last Thursday. The petition was signed by thousands of people. Delegates from many Ecuadorian cities formed a human chain that encircled the Congress.

Anita Siguenza, Quito coordinator of the human chain, pointed out that Ecuador has paid more than \$35 billion in interest on a \$16 billion dollar debt, nearly double what the country owes.

The protesters demanded that funds be used for sorely needed social programs.

Twenty-four hour strike by Venezuelan university professors

Thousands of professors in every state university in Venezuela struck last Thursday demanding payment for back wages. The strike shut down 17 universities and involved between 35,000 and 40,000 professors. While the debt was incurred by past administrations, the government of Hugo Chavez promised to pay it by the last quarter of 1999. This has yet to happen.

Teamsters expand strike against Overnite

The strike by truck drivers and warehousemen against Overnite Transportation has spread to 120 terminals in 35 states, according to a Teamsters union spokesman. The action, which is affecting three-quarters of the company's US operations, has also closed four major service centers.

Teamsters spokesman David Cameron said more than 2,000 of Overnite's 8,000 workers stayed home. Overnite is claiming that a combination of non-striking workers with temporary replacements is maintaining operations.

The Teamsters have called the strike an unfair labor practices strike and have based it on the statements of a former Overnite operations manager, Dale Watson, who acknowledged that management systematically singled out rank-and-file union supporters for harassment and firing. "There's too much injustice being done to employees," said Watson. "After being responsible for

firing more than 40 union supporters, I had a change of heart. I came forward because I was upset at how Overnite is treating its employees." The Teamsters report that over 1,000 individual violations have been filed with the National Labor Relations Board against Overnite for unlawful conduct, including intimidation, harassment and unlawful discharge.

American Airlines and pilots' union resolve differences over merger

American Airlines and its pilots union concluded talks October 30 that resolve the dispute over the airline's acquisition of Reno Air, while outlining future relations and possible contract concessions.

When American purchased Reno about a year ago, it sought to maintain the Reno Pilots at their lower wage rate during an extended merger period. The pilots pointed to their contract which specified that all flying by the company or its affiliates had to be done by American pilots. When American ignored the APA (Allied Pilots Association) protest, pilots responded with a 10-day sick-out by 2,700 pilots last February that canceled 6,700 flights and stranded 600,000 passengers.

In the course of the labor action, US District Judge Joe Kendall imposed a temporary restraining order. When the APA was unable to immediately stop the job action, the union was hit with a \$45.5 million fine to be handed over to American.

Last Saturday's agreement increased by 300 the number of APA pilots who cannot be furloughed. This matches the number of Reno pilots being absorbed into American's operations. Reno Pilots were given a 45 percent raise.

The union also agreed to a two-year contract extension to the current agreement that is due to expire in 2001. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* cited unnamed sources that claim the talks discussed swapping the union's \$45.5 million fine for future concessions to the company. The APA refused to answer any questions concerning the issue.

One contract issue that is considered of the highest importance is a revision of the Scopes Clause that limits

American Airlines from establishing global partnerships that would allow them to replace domestic routes piloted by APA members with lower wage pilots from other countries.

In a joint statement with the company, the APA announced it “will consider a number of mutually developed concepts and proposals aimed at resolving a number of past and current disputes and improving the working relationship.” This contrasts with a statement issued earlier this year in which the APA declared a “better working relationship ... may depend on further changes in senior AMR management.”

TWA flight attendants move to decertify the IAM

Flight attendants at Trans World Airlines launched a campaign to decertify the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and establish an independent union. The move comes in the wake of dissatisfaction with the IAM's handling of contract talks over the summer with company management.

Dissident flight attendants who formed the Coalition of Professional Flight Attendants claim to have obtained 25 percent of the necessary signatures in the first 48 hours of petitioning. The National Labor Relations Board requires over 50 percent of bargaining unit members to sign cards calling for an election before a decertification vote can be held.

Two weeks ago TWA mechanics, also dissatisfied with the IAM, launched a campaign to decertify. The Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association, which is challenging the IAM for representation of the mechanics, claims that they already have sufficient signatures to compel an election.

TWA's flight attendants have had a short experience with the IAM. In 1997 they dumped the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants to become a part of the 16,000-member IAM bargaining unit. This followed a pattern of consolidation by the IAM at several major airlines. But the IAM has used the greater membership to increase its dues base, enrich the labor bureaucracy while helping the airlines to increase profits. The IAM is now finding itself under siege by members who either gave concessions or find their wages and benefits remaining stagnant as airline profits hit record highs.

Autoworkers ratify Ford-UAW pact

The United Auto Workers announced the ratification of a four-year agreement with Ford Motor Company by an 85 percent margin. The 101,000 UAW members at Ford will receive 3 percent wage increases in each year of the new agreement along with a \$1,350 signing bonus and increased pensions.

A major conflict in the negotiations was Ford's spin-off of its Visteon parts unit, a move that will lead to wage and benefit losses and job destruction. The UAW allowed the spin-off, which will affect 23,500 UAW members, in exchange for Ford's promise of lifetime job security and parity with Ford in wages, benefits and profit-sharing over the next three contracts.

Nova Scotia Paramedics end strike, injunction in Sydney city workers walkout

The 650 paramedics in Nova Scotia who walked off the job in a fight for wage increases and better working conditions have learned that their employer, Emergency Medical Care Inc., sent a memo to various regional fire departments requesting aid to break the paramedics' strike. In the plan, ambulances were to be available to the fire departments, which are often the first to arrive at a scene of an accident. Realizing that this would pit firefighters and paramedics against each other, all but one of Nova Scotia's 300 fire departments rejected this request. The strike ended shortly before legislation was being passed that would declare paramedic service essential and force binding arbitration. The paramedics have been without a contract for 15 months and earn between \$7 and \$12 an hour.

Meanwhile, the Cape Breton Regional Municipality has obtained an injunction against 350 striking trash collectors and other city employees in Sydney that bars non-striking office personnel from honoring the city workers' picket lines. The Nova Scotia Labour Relations Board ruled that the actions of inside workers, who have been supporting the walkout since it began October 25, constituted an illegal work stoppage. The city workers have been fighting for job security against the municipality's privatization plans.



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