

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 November 1999

Haitian teachers strike

After a month on strike both major teachers unions have resolved to continue their walkout to press demands for salary increases, better working conditions and improvements for students.

Although the teachers have won public sympathy the government has taken a hard line against their demands. Its initial response was to demote the union leaders while maintaining that the Ministry of Education has no money for the teachers. This radicalized the strike with teachers protesting in many cities.

More protests over economic crisis in Ecuador

Workers, farmers and Indians belonging to the Unitary Front of Ecuador announced that they will reinstate protests against the government of Jamil Mahuad this week. The Unitary Front is also considering another general strike, and truckers are also planning another strike.

The protests are focusing on Ecuador's economic crisis. The fluctuation of the US dollar is contributing to rising inflation, which is now 56 percent a year. Unemployment is at 17 percent. During the last six months, real wages have fallen by 40 percent. Medicine costs as much as 60 percent more under conditions where 70 percent of the country's citizens have no access to medical care. Ecuador has paid the international banks \$35 billion, well above the \$16 billion it was lent by foreign creditors.

Hospital workers strike in Argentina

Hospital personnel at the Transito Caseres de Allende Hospital, one Cordoba's biggest, struck last Friday demanding that the Argentine government keep its promises to improve conditions. This is the first strike since Governor De la Sota reopened hospitals and regularized health services. Health workers have been living through an emergency period, declared by the provincial government in 1996. Last week workers at other provincial hospitals began discussions to join the strike.

Venezuelan street vendors paralyze capital

Hundreds of street sales people paralyzed Caracas on November 3 and 4, demanding the right to sell on the sidewalks of the capital. The street vendors shouted, "We are hungry! Let us work!" Joining them were employees of the National Congress, who are demanding pay increases, and other trade unionists.

Over half of Venezuela's people live in poverty. The numbers are increasing as a result of a severe economic crisis, which has forced over 1,000 industries to close this year. More than 600,000 workers have been laid off. The official unemployment is at 20 percent. Over 5 million Venezuelans work in the so-called informal sector, a form of disguised unemployment, many as street hawkers.

Argentine protesters demand compensation for victims of armament factory explosion

Citizens of Rio Tercero, Argentina, south of the provincial capital of Cordoba, marched on November 3, the fourth anniversary of the explosion of a military armaments factory. The protesters demanded an end to the cover-up, punishment of those responsible and just compensation for material and psychological damages.

On November 3, 1995, the military factory exploded, killing seven people and destroying the city as though it had been bombed from the air. Shrapnel and bombs hit every street. Homes, schools and factories were destroyed. The city was left with no communications or electricity. Preliminary investigations indicated that the explosion was the result of sabotage to cover up illegal arm sales to Croatia and Ecuador.

Chilean doctors strike for higher pay

On November 3 public hospital doctors began a work stoppage in Chile. The strike began in Santiago, Chile's capital, and spread to other cities the following day. The doctors, whose monthly pay is \$365, are demanding a 120 percent increase. President Eduardo Frei has declared that it will not grant more than a 22 percent increase. Public doctors in Chile provide emergency services to 85 percent of the population. A national doctors strike has been called for November 12.

Brazilian peasant leader assassinated

A volley of bullets killed Dorcelina Folador, 36, mayor of Mundo Nuevo, a small hamlet in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso del Sur, as she opened the door to her home. The killers have yet to be identified. The assassination was revealed by a spokesperson of the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST). A long-time activist of MST, Folador had been elected mayor of the town on the Brazil/Paraguay border three years ago. She was a member of the reformist Workers Party (PT) of Brazil. In the last elections she received the support of 83 percent of Mundo Nuevo's voters.

Teamsters strike at Overnite continues

Teamsters truck drivers and warehouse workers have been on strike against Overnite Transportation Company, a subsidiary of Union Pacific, since October 24 to press for union recognition. Union officials say pickets are up at 140 of Overnite's 166 terminals across the country and that the company's business has been cut by 30 percent.

After five years of seeking to organize Overnite, Teamsters officials say they represent 3,600 out of 8,200 workers at the staunchly antiunion company. Former Overnite Operations Manager Dale Watson said the company had "hit lists" of workers who supported the Teamsters and had illegally fired scores of workers on trumped-up charges. More than 1,000 complaints have been filed against the company for harassment, intimidation and unlawful discharge.

Tentative agreement with agents at US Airways

US Airways and the Communications Workers of America reached a tentative agreement November 4 covering 10,000 passenger service agents. The five-year agreement is reputed to contain job security and retirement provisions along with a parity pay increase that will result in a \$22-an-hour pay rate by the time the contract expires in 2004.

US Airways still has to negotiate a contract with 9,000 members of the Association of Flight Attendants who are threatening to strike during the Christmas travel season if they do attain a contract that boosts pay and benefits.

Talks deadlocked at Uniroyal Technology

Talks are deadlocked between Uniroyal Technology Corporation and the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical & Energy Workers International Union (PACE) over wages and overtime issues. About 150 workers at Uniroyal's Warsaw, Indiana plant have been seeking their first contract since voting in the union in 1995. Workers have been without a wage increase for five years while the company is insisting on a new two-tier wage system in current negotiations.

PACE has limited the struggle at Uniroyal to a "corporate campaign" to pressure CEO Howard R. Curd and outside directors with letters of protest and other similar measures. PACE also represents another 150 workers at Uniroyal's coated fabrics plant in Wisconsin who are at mid-term in a six-year contract.

Steelworkers to hold protest at Ohio steel plant

United Steelworkers (USW) Local 169 is holding a rally November 8 to protest the lockout by AK/Armco Steel against 600 union members that began September 1. The company has brought in 200 armed guards and replacement workers to replace strikers at its Mansfield, Ohio plant.

The USW has complained that AK/Armco violated a city ordinance that requires identification and background checks on members of private security forces. The USW is also calling for the prosecution of a strikebreaker who used a company truck to intentionally slam into the vehicle of a striker.

Union seeks return of 22 victimized baseball umpires

Baseball umpires met November 6 to discuss the decision by the major league baseball owners to reject a grievance seeking the reinstatement of 22 umpires. Last summer the umpires resigned en masse to pressure the owners to start early contract talks before the baseball season ended. The umpires feared that owners would lock them out when their contract expired at the end of the year.

However the strategy collapsed when a group of umpires broke ranks and withdrew their resignations. The owners then refused to rescind the resignations of 22 umpires and replaced them with minor league umpires. A labor arbitrator has recessed the case until December 13 when he will rule on the owners' action.

Laid off paperworkers continue to occupy Ontario plant

Twenty laid-off workers have entered their third week of occupation at the insolvent Gallaher Thorold paper mill in Thorold, Ontario. The workers, who are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, occupied the mill after learning that a liquidation firm had made the highest bid for the mill.

One of the workers in the occupied plant, union representative

Michael Lambert, said the source of the problem lies with the Toronto Dominion Bank, to which \$17 million is owed. Workers at the plant had previously attempted to purchase the mill, in hopes of saving their jobs, but were unable to raise sufficient funds. By occupying the plant they hope to draw in support and force the receivership to limit the bidding to companies that are intent on restarting the mill.

The Gallaher Thorold mill, which had been operating since the turn of the century, had about 350 employees when it closed in May.

Toronto Symphony Orchestra musicians reject final offer

Talks have come to a standstill after the negotiating committee representing 94 musicians of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra rejected what management claimed to be its final offer. According to the Kathleen MacLean, spokesperson for the musicians, the offer would leave the orchestra at eighteenth in salary rankings, making it difficult to attract the best players. The musicians have been on strike since September 25.

British Columbia port workers locked out

Two thousand workers at the Port of Vancouver were locked out Sunday by the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) after members of International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada rejected management's latest contract offer. The union is fighting a 1998 decision by Sultan, which owns Pacific Coast Terminal dock, to contract out testing and sampling work to the nonunion firm Certifipect Services. The lockout affects port workers throughout British Columbia, including the province's busiest port in Vancouver, which ships about \$89 million worth of goods a day. Jamie Lamb, spokesperson for the port authority, said that the lockout "affects just about every major industry in the west—agriculture, mining, the forest industry" and "trade with 90 countries."

BCMEA has demanded that the union submit its final offer to union members for a vote. But union President Tom Drefresne said that there is no significant change from the offer that workers had rejected by 85 percent last June. The port workers have been without a contract since December of last year.



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