

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 November 1999

Bolivian workers oppose privatizations

The urban teachers union of La Paz and student teachers from the University of San Andres marched last Tuesday against new legislation to privatize education and strip public employees of their rights. Teachers union leader Vilma Plata vowed to continue the protests until the government of Hugo Banzer listens to their concerns. The government is instituting a plan to privatize public education as part of an agreement with the World Bank. The new legislation would make it easier to fire teachers and threatens the traditional autonomy that the university has had.

At least 17 groups are on a hunger strike across Bolivia to protest cuts in the National Health Fund (CNS). CNS Director Jorge Solares confirmed that this massive hunger strike was to protest measures to privatize the country's health services. Health Minister Guillermo Cuentas is refusing to negotiate with the Bolivian Union Federation (COB).

COB has called for a mass mobilization on Monday, November 15 against the privatization of the National Health Fund (CNS), the Law on Public Servants and the Law on Water and Sewers. At the same time, National Federation of Farm Workers Executive Secretary Humberto Choque declared that 50,000 agricultural workers will initiate a hunger strike against the Water and Sewer legislation and against a new Agrarian Reform Law. He explained that both these laws in effect privatize water and land. The Agrarian Reform Law reverses what little is left of the 1952 Agrarian Reform Law, the first and, while it lasted, most thorough in the history of South America.

Debtors march on Mexican capital

A debtors "March on Horseback" is expected to arrive in Mexico City on November 20, coinciding with the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution. The march began nearly a month ago when 200 riders left the city of Juarez, Chihuahua, on the Mexican/Texas border. Juarez is 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) from Mexico City. It is widely expected to grow into the tens of thousands by the time they reach the capital.

The march was organized by El Barzon, an organization that represents small farmers, small businesses and professionals. According to El Barzon leader Fernando Flores, the protest is publicizing the plight of Mexican farmers, who have been "unfairly indebted to the banks. As the protesters left the central state of Aguascalientes, they reported that authorities have tried to block their way and repress the march all along its route.

During the next few days, the march will go through the states of Guanajuato and Queretaro. These states are governed by the right-wing PAN (Party of National Advance). One week ago, Congressman Maximiliano Barbosa, a supporter of the protest, was brutally beaten by the Jalisco police in Guadalajara, also governed by PAN.

Popular protest against the Ecuadorian government

Popular opposition to Ecuadorian President Jamil Mahuad's austerity policies is growing as Ecuador plunges into a major recession. Official unemployment is 18 percent, with 55 percent of the population underemployed. The Popular Front (FP) and organizations of labor, rural workers and native groups initiated a protest campaign last Thursday, part of a series of escalating street demonstrations that are demanding Mahuad's resignation.

Chilean doctors strike begins

On Friday, November 12, 9,500 public health doctors, dentists and

surgeons went on strike in Chile. Doctors are demanding a 120 percent raise over four years. Currently full-time doctors earn \$827 a month. Part-time doctors make as little as \$350 dollars a month. The doctors rejected an offer from the government of Eduardo Frei for a \$105 raise plus \$50 more a month for overtime work.

The doctors had been carrying out partial work stoppages since November 3. Public support for the doctors is high, even though the strike is affecting 85 percent of the population who have no private insurance and cannot afford expensive private health services.

Teamsters strike continues against Overnite

Teamsters pickets have reportedly closed four Overnite trucking terminals in Little Rock, Arkansas; Milwaukee; New Orleans; and Rockford, Illinois as the strike against the giant nonunion trucking firm enters its fourth week. The union states that pickets have been set up at 126 of Overnite's 166 facilities, but the company denies that the strike is substantially affecting its business. The Teamsters is seeking recognition from the company which has stubbornly opposed unionization.

Teamsters President James Hoffa has organized token protests including distributions of a leaflet, entitled "Tell Overnite: Obey the Law" to shoppers at Lowes Home Improvement, Linen N Things, and Bed, Bath & Beyond, three of Overnite's largest customers.

Meanwhile the National Labor Relations Board affirmed the right of the Teamsters to represent Overnite Transportation workers at four service centers against filings by a group of workers to decertify the union. The NLRB ruling affected Overnite workers in Norfolk, Virginia, Bridgeton, Missouri, Louisville, Kentucky and North Atlanta, Georgia.

Meanwhile, another decertification petition was filed by workers at the Overnite terminal in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This brings to 17 the number of petitions filed by employees since 1996 at Overnite terminals. The Teamsters charge the filings are part of a campaign to harass and undermine the union's drive to bring all 8,000 Overnite workers into the union. Presently some 3,000 workers are Teamsters members.

The rulings come as the Teamsters continue an unfair labor practices strike, called in protest of Overnite's firing and intimidation of pro-union employees. But Overnite claims it continues to operate all 22 Teamsters-represented terminals.

Engineering and Technical union call for rejection of Boeing contract

Union representatives for engineers and technicians at Boeing Company voted unanimously to reject the company's four-year contract offer due to benefit cuts and lack of lump-sum bonuses that machinists received when they ratified their contract last September.

The 125-member governing council of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) objected to the company's intent to make weekend work mandatory without overtime pay, strip medical benefits from early retirees and require workers for the first time to contribute to the cost of medical coverage.

But the SPEEA leadership appears to be most incensed over the company's refusal to pay bonuses, which would make the concessions more palatable. "Executives at Boeing got bonuses. Machinists got a 10 percent bonus," said SPEEA executive director Charles Bofferding. "Why won't the company make the same offer to the technical workers?"

Some 21,000 workers, scientists, engineers, manual writers and computer programmers in Seattle, Spokane and Portland are covered by the contract that expires December 1. However, less than half of this group pays union dues to SPEEA. Another 1,300 engineers in Wichita, Kansas face a contract deadline of December 5. Their negotiations are due to begin soon.

North Carolina clothing workers unionize

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) reached a union recognition agreement with Pillowtex, owner of six North Carolina mills that run under the name Fieldcrest Cannon. In a close election, workers voted 2,270-2,102 for unionization.

The agreement, which will cover 5,000 workers, came without a strike in a state where only 4.2 percent of the hourly workforce is unionized. Pillowtex's top executive, Chuck Hansen, declared, "I felt further controversy would be very divisive for our work force, and it was better to resolve the issue than to continue litigation."

The vote by Fieldcrest workers was in part fueled by the opposition to the destruction of jobs resulting from increased automation at the plants. Fieldcrest Cannon is a maker of towels, sheets and comforters. Its parent, Pillowtex, makes pillows, mattress pads, blankets and down comforters.

Radio City Music Hall orchestra threatens strike

Radio City Music Hall's unionized orchestra members voted November 12 to authorize a strike if the theater's management and Local 802 of the musicians union do not come to an agreement. The musicians were angered by the 2 percent wage increase placed on the table while ticket prices underwent double-digit increases for the Christmas Spectacular, which has just begun.

Louisville GE workers accept concessions

Workers at General Electric's Appliance Park complex in Louisville, Kentucky voted 3,055 to 1,199 to accept an agreement reached by the Electrical Workers union and management that requires productivity increases in exchange for canceling the transfer of 800 jobs to Mexico.

The union agreed to help cut \$80 million in annual production costs if GE retains production of two new refrigerators at the plant. Despite this, GE will still transfer production of four larger refrigerators to Mexico with the resulting loss of 400 jobs by 2001.

The union concessions include lump-sum payments over the course of the new agreement, instead of wage increases.

Calgary Herald workers on strike

On November 10 more than 200 employees at the *Calgary Herald* newspaper set up picket lines, just hours after the Alberta Labour Relations Board announced a ruling that management's decision to lock workers out of the building was legal.

The first contract between management and the two key unions has been in negotiations for almost a year. One of the main issues that the union is seeking to pass is one concerning seniority, where in the event of layoffs decisions will be based on seniority rather than on management's discretion. Other demands including seeking a night differential for employees and a 5 percent increase for each year of a three-year contract.

This is the second strike in the newspaper's 116-year history, with the last strike in the late 1940s. Workers only recently became unionized when tensions flared between the *Calgary Herald* newsroom and management in 1998. The president of Local 115A of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada said, "We are expecting a long and difficult fight ... and while our fight is with the *Calgary Herald*, it goes beyond that. There is a perception [newspaper owner] Holinger has drawn the line in the sand and said we don't want a successful union in Calgary."

The newspaper, which has a circulation of 137,000, is owned by Canadian newspaper magnate Conrad Black. Meanwhile, journalists and newsroom-support staff at another of Black's newspaper, the *Regina Leader-Post*, have voted in favor of a strike mandate. Anne Kyle, union

local president, said the union plans on using the vote to apply to the Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board for binding first-contract arbitration. The main issues have been that of wages and job security.

Vancouver dockworkers threatened with back-to-work legislation

Federal Labour Minister Claudette Bradshaw has retracted the government's previous pledge not to intervene and has threatened to introduce back-to-work legislation on Monday to settle a dispute between the 2,000 Vancouver longshoremen and the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association. Meanwhile, leaders from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) are encouraging port workers to accept a contract brought back by a federal mediator.

Various business groups, including coal and forestry industry officials, have been lobbying the government since the BCMEA locked out the workers a week ago. Reform Party leader Preston Manning has also pressed the government for back-to-work legislation, accusing the Liberal government of not defending businesses in the West.

The port workers, who have been without a contract since December 1998, were locked out on November 7 after their union refused to put the last contract offer from the employers association to a vote. The union wants the association to compel a sulfur consortium, Sultran, to return a sulfur-testing contract to a unionized company.

Federal mediator Warren Edmondson has intervened to settle the dispute. ILWU Vice President Bill Carrigan said, "We feel confident that the recommendations will be accepted," adding that the recommendations will probably go to the union membership for a vote by Wednesday. Union President Tom Dufresne said, "Although far from satisfactory, we believe the settlement that's recommended by the federal mediator is the best we can do at this time." Details on the recommendations have not yet been revealed.

Workers end 26-day occupation of threatened Ontario paper mill

Twenty former employees of Thorold Gallaher Paper Mill have ended their 26-day sit-in after being told that the buyer of the bankrupt mill will reopen the plant. There were 310 jobs in jeopardy, as workers feared that the receiver and trustee, Ernst & Young, would liquidate the plant.

Negotiations began on Monday for a new contract between the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union that represents the mill workers, and the buyer, former Domtar manager Jeff Butler.

While workers say that their actions saved the mill, the union vice-president for the Ontario region, Cecil Makowski, acknowledged that the new contract "might result in a smaller workforce." The plant is expected to open after the new year.



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