

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 November 1999

Salvadorean social security employees strike widens

Employees of the Salvadoran Institute of Social Security (ISSS) began a partial strike on November 15, the ninth strike by social security workers in El Salvador this year. They are demanding a wage increase and cancellation of the privatization of health care. Oscar Aguilar, general secretary of the Social Security Workers Union, announced that the strike would be indefinite and could be extended from administration to general services to emergency services. He warned that the strike could spread to other sectors. Public sector workers and doctors are on the verge of a strike.

On November 17 the courts declared the strike illegal because it supposedly endangered public health services. The judge threatened penalties such as firings and pay cuts. On the next day, workers defied the court orders, gaining further support from Social Security recipients standing together with the strikers and public health doctors joining the strike. On November 19 other labor organizations declared that they would join the strike on Monday. They included those in water and sewerage, public works, economics, dock workers, health, the court employees and university professors.

Bolivian rural workers paralyze La Paz

A massive march of rural workers and small producers from surrounding areas stopped all activity in La Paz, one of Bolivia's central cities, blocking main streets and routes leading to government offices. They are demanding more resources for farmers and suspension of laws that privatize water and sewers.

Landless Brazilians occupy president's farm

About 400 members of the Sem Terra Movement took over Brazilian President Cardoso's farm, Corrego da Ponte, in Minas Gerais, 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of Brazilia, Brazil's capital city. The landless peasants are demanding genuine land reform that will redistribute land to small producers. They are also calling for access to credit for those who have already received land. In Minas Gerais, there are 800 recent recipients of land that need assistance. The protesters pledge that they will not leave until negotiations get under way.

Bolivian university workers, professors and students mobilize

Workers, professors and students of the Gabriel Rene Moreno University in Santa Cruz, Bolivia mobilized last Tuesday to demand funds for their university and the repudiation of a law that threatens academic autonomy. New labor legislation stripping workers' rights has provoked protests from all over the country.

Mexican students and professors protest budget cuts

Professors and striking students at UNAM (Mexico's National Autonomous University) marched against President Ernesto Zedillo's proposed education budget for next year. They are demanding that the education budget be 12 percent of the gross domestic product, pointing out that more money is being dedicated to the rescue of failed banks and election campaigns than for education and health.

Ecuadorian truckers block main cities

Thirty thousand truck drivers blocked the main streets of Quito, the Ecuadorian capital, last Thursday for six hours to protest the increase in the value of the dollar, and Quito's traffic rules. Similar protests took place in other cities. Because of the drop in the dollar, truck operators and taxi

cab owners, who generally borrow in dollars to buy their equipment, have seen their incomes fall. Many of their loans were made when one dollar equaled 4,000 sucres. One month ago it took 11,000 sucres to buy a dollar. Last week the price had reached 18,500 per dollar.

Teachers wildcat in Birmingham, Alabama ends

Birmingham teachers returned to work November 16 after a three-day wildcat strike forced the city school board to rescind the granting of a \$30,000 raise to Superintendent Johnny Brown. The raise brought Brown's salary to \$181,000 a year at a time when schools are in decay and teachers face stagnant pay and intolerable working conditions.

On Friday, November 12 the board unanimously voted for Brown's raise. This followed other fat raises of as much as \$20,000 to high-level administrators. The news of the decision led to 600 teachers walking off the job on the same day. By Monday the strike grew to 1,264 of the 2,100 teachers in the Birmingham system. Bus drivers and lunchroom workers joined the action and 30,000 of the schools 38,000 students stayed home.

On November 15, Brown attempted to hang on to part of his raise by offering to donate \$17,000 of his salary to student scholarships while calling on parents to force their children back to school. But the strike remained strong the following day and four board members voted unanimously to rescind the raise.

The raises were galling to teachers who received raises of only 1 to 1.5 percent. Alabama teachers' earnings average about \$35,800, below the national average of \$38,000. Teachers have also been scapegoated for poor student achievement.

Brown announced that no punitive actions would be taken against teachers who wildcatted. The Birmingham Education Association conceded that the strike was probably illegal and believes they could face problems over it. A 1958 attorney general's opinion declared teachers did not have the right to strike. Birmingham teachers, despite being members of the Alabama Education Association, do not have collective bargaining rights or contracts with the state. The last big teachers' strike occurred in 1979 when the teachers walked out over the sacking of 42 teachers in a cost-cutting endeavor by the board.

Teamsters union cites gains in Overnite strike

The Teamsters union indicated last week that its nearly month-old Unfair Labor Practices strike against Overnite Transportation is having an impact on the company. In Texas two drivers joined the picket line and the following day all other drivers and dockworkers at the terminal joined the picket.

Overnite CEO Leo Suggs has said the company has spent \$20 million so far on the strike. The company's Director of Communications reports that freight volume plunged 30 percent from 40,000 to 28,000 bills a day. The union claims that Overnite has been offering discounts as high as 77 percent in order to retain its customer base.

The strike was based on information provided by a former Overnite Operations Manager who revealed a systematic pattern of violations of federal labor laws that were initiated by top management.

At this point Overnite is showing no sign of conceding the fight. It claims that 93 percent of its 13,000 employees are reporting for work and that the Teamsters are largely manning picket lines with workers from other carriers. Last week the company announced it will challenge an

NLRB ruling that awarded Teamsters bargaining rights for workers at Overnite terminals in Norfolk, Virginia; Bridgeton, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky and North Atlanta. The NLRB decision said in part: "The severity of [Overnite's] misconduct is compounded by the involvement of high-ranking officials. [Overnite's] unfair labor practices emanated from the highest level of officials."

Broadway stagehands threaten strike

The 385 members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees gave unanimous authorization to their negotiating team to call a strike against 23 Broadway theaters unless there is a turn in negotiations. Union members are seeking higher wages and the defense of sick leave provisions along with a previous contract provision that bars arbitrary firings.

The League of American Theaters and Producers, the trade group representing the Broadway theaters, indicates that an "amicable settlement without any disruption" will be reached. The union strike threat could come as early as Thanksgiving Day and threaten performances such as "Miss Saigon," "Chicago" and "Fosse." The contract governing stagehands expired July 31.

Boeing settles with Labor Department over discrimination

Boeing Co. came to an agreement with the US Labor Department to hand over \$4.5 million in a settlement over salary discrimination against women and minorities. The payment will compensate, according to Boeing, some 4,400 women and 1,600 minority men for back pay and future raises. The agreement also stipulates the company must review policies covering salaries and hiring. Boeing admitted no wrongdoing in settling the dispute.

Under the settlement Boeing is subject to a further review of its policy that could result in an increase in the payment. In September the aerospace company paid out \$15 million to settle a bias lawsuit brought by black employees that is being appealed by some blacks who believe the ruling didn't sufficiently compensate them. The company is presently the target of another discrimination case filed by nine Asian-American employees. The recent deal with the Labor Department arises due to regulations governing companies who receive federal contracts. Last year alone, Boeing received \$11 billion in federal contracts.

More legal action threatened against American Airlines pilots

A federal Magistrate has allowed a \$50 million lawsuit by disgruntled passengers affected by an American Airlines pilots' sick-out to go forward. The 11-day sick-out occurred in February after American, unilaterally and against its union contract, implemented a merger of pilots from its acquisition of Reno Air into the seniority lists of its own pilots. Some 6,700 flights were canceled as a result of the action.

The Allied Pilots Association (APA), representing American Airlines' pilots, argued to no avail that they had the right to resort to the sick-out under labor laws. US Magistrate Jeff Kaplan restricted the number of plaintiffs to only those who experienced difficulties after a federal judge ordered pilots to end the sick-out. Some 4,000 cancellations occurred after the back-to-work order. The APA will ask presiding US District Judge Jorge Solis to review the magistrate's ruling.

The lawsuit emerges on the heels of a resolution between the APA and American Airlines management over a \$45.5 million lawsuit leveled against the union for not ending the sick-out after the federal order to do so. The class-action lawsuit brings together five separate lawsuits filed earlier in the year. The lawsuit is a first of its kind where consumers are seeking damages over a labor dispute involving a back-to-work order.

US Airways flight attendants to ask for cooling-off period

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) announced November 19 that they would ask the National Mediation Board for a 30-day cooling-off period that will pave the way for a strike against US Airways.

"We still have 17 sections of our contract that haven't been resolved, including the major issues of wages and retirement," AFA President

Lynn Lenosky declared. Back on September 27 the union's 9,000 members at US Airways held protests to mark the one-thousandth day without a contract.

Union members are bitter over the lack of a decent agreement, particularly because US Airways made \$538 million in profits last year. Flight attendants haven't had a raise in nearly four years. They object to contract provisions that award pensions in a manner that penalizes married flight attendants. They are also protesting the company's refusal to apply the Family Medical Leave Act to flight attendants. US Airways has been pushing in labor negotiations for cuts in benefits and alterations in scheduling provisions and other quality of life issues.

Lockout at British Columbia ports ended

An agreement has been reached between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), ending an eight-day lockout of 2,000 unionized port workers. The tentative agreement was made shortly after the Federal government had threatened workers with back-to-work legislation and a federal mediator was brought in to speed up negotiations.

The contract, which is retroactive to January 1, provides a 9.5 percent wage increase over the life of the agreement, which expires at the end of 2002. Unresolved is the issue involving the use of nonunion contract workers by the sulfur consortium, Sultran, Ltd., which provoked the union's refusal to ratify the original contract. Although the contract does not force Sultran to change its contracting-out practices, some meager provisions have been made to allow the union to persuade Sultran that it should do so.

Meanwhile, after pressure from various industries affected by the shutdown of the Vancouver port, the federal government is considering introducing legislation that would designate major ports as essential services.

Quebec civil servants protest

A protest rally by an estimated 10,000 civil servant workers was held in front of the Quebec National Assembly on Saturday and workers are threatening to walk off the job if contract negotiations, that have been dragging on for 18 months, are not accelerated. The protest took place nearly a month after 350,000 teachers, nurses, support staff and civil servants voted against a general strike by a common front of Quebec public unions. Union leaders are now saying that there may be a strike if a deal isn't reached by the end of December. The Bouchard government, which has adopted an austere program of budget cutting, has stated that it can only offer workers a 5 percent raise over three years. Working conditions, especially in health care and education, and wages are the major concern.



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