

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 November 1999

Indian march reaches Quito

On November 23, to the rhythm of drums and cymbals, 200,000 Indians from the Amazon region marched on the Ecuadoran Congress after a two-day trek on foot and horseback. The native marchers demanded that Congress approve a Petroleum Reform Law that gives the Amazonian provinces oil royalties of \$2 per barrel. They declared that their region is in dire need of funds for roads, education and health. A congressional commission met with them.

Costa Rican dock workers clash with police

Hundreds of laid-off dock workers clashed with police in Puerto Limon, Costa Rica during protests on Thursday and Friday. Anti-riot police squads were on the alert against further protests. Twenty workers were arrested. The workers are demanding that the government authorize payment from a \$2 million welfare fund, part of an agreement in 1995 which resulted in the layoff of 300 dock workers. Puerto Limon is Costa Rica's main port on the Caribbean Sea and is also the country's poorest city.

Fujimori spurns peasant protesters

Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori refused to meet with 150,000 peasant petitioners who had walked for eight days to the capital Lima from Huancavelica, 500 kilometers (300 miles) away. The protesters are calling for the economic development of Huancavelica, the most impoverished region in Peru. They are also demanding the National Elections Commission prevent Fujimori from running for another term.

The peasants, who have been winning wide support from labor and other native groups around Lima, camped out in Lima's Plaza Mayor for three days before police expelled them in a surprise raid last Thursday.

Honduran Mayas begin land occupations

Hundreds of Maya-Chorti Indians began a massive "land recovery" in the Ocotepeque Department in western Honduras. They are demanding over 14,000 hectares (35,000 acres) of land, granted to them in 1850. At the beginning of this decade their land was infiltrated by ranchers, with the assistance of the government. The ranchers used fraud and force to dispossess the Mayans of their land.

The previous government of Carlos Reina agreed to return 5,000 hectares (12,500 acres), but the land was never actually returned. Three years ago the Maya-Chortis took over the Costa Rican embassy in Honduras to bring the world's attention to their struggle.

Colombian farmers lift 25-day blockade

On Friday, after blocking the Pan American Highway for 25 days, the farmers of Narino and Cauca reached an agreement with the Colombian government. The agreement calls for \$50 million to be invested in their communities. This is a small sum, considering that it is earmarked for a number of infrastructural projects that include improvements in roads, water and sewage, telephone services, education and health. The farmers agreed to lift their strike and received safe passage home from the police.

At the same time, the union of transport operators began a partial stoppage on Thursday to protest fuel price hikes.

Chilean artists end longest strike in a decade

Last Wednesday, performers at the Municipal Theater in Chile's capital of Santiago ended the longest legal strike in the country's recent history, following an agreement with the Frei government.

The 320 members of the ballet, chorus, orchestra and technical staff kept the theaters closed for 54 days. Last week, as the government was threatening to fire them all and hire new performers and staff, a group of artists began a hunger strike to press for a solution.

Mario Del Rio, president of the artists union, said that the length of this strike was very unusual, particularly because it involved artists. The performers were demanding better wages, less Sunday work and better traveling conditions when on the road.

The performers obtained a 10 percent raise, the right not to work more than 15 Sundays a year, no Christmas work, and limitations on having to travel in air force cargo planes. Despite these gains, Del Rio did not proclaim a victory. Instead, he said that given the economic conditions, this was the best that could be achieved.

"We were able to establish contract language that pointed the way toward a better arena for artistic activities," said Del Rio. "We have been able to establish precedents that will help organize our future struggles." Currently, Municipal Theater employees earn between \$700 and \$3,500 a month. Chile is coming out of a severe recession that produced double-digit rates of unemployment.

Lordstown workers reject contract

More than 60 percent of the auto workers voting at GM's Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant rejected a four-year local agreement at the facility, one of the largest auto facilities in North America, with over 5,000 workers. It took a huge turnout of more than 95 percent of the membership to defeat the contract, which was recommended by the leadership of United Auto Workers Local 1112.

The principal issue is the further cutting of jobs at the complex, which once employed over 10,000 workers. GM has said it won't replace the 440 workers who have retired this year, and another 277 workers hired on a temporary basis are to be laid off December 11. In both cases the tasks which these workers performed will simply be added to the workload of those who remain.

Contract talks at impasse for mechanics at Mesaba Airlines

Union and company officials at Mesaba Airlines reached an impasse November 26 over negotiations for 200 airline mechanics. The union will now await permission from the National Mediation Board (NMB) for a release from mediation, which will start a 30-day countdown toward a possible strike. If AMFA does not strike it is believed Mesaba will impose wages and work rules on its mechanics.

Mesaba's mechanics are involved in a two-year struggle for their first contract after voting in the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). Since March, negotiations have been mediated by the NMB. A 10-year licensed mechanic at Mesaba is presently paid

\$15 an hour. AMFA is seeking an increase to \$23 an hour.

Mesaba is the largest regional affiliate of Northwest Airline and serves 85 cities in 18 states and Canada. In the Minneapolis-St. Paul and Detroit hub areas, Mesaba is Northwest's only regional airliner and could potentially disrupt service. AMFA is also currently negotiating a contract for Northwest's mechanics and cleaners who voted to dump the International Association of Machinists (IAM) last summer. The IAM has challenged the NLRB election results and a final ruling on the election is expected in the next week.

Talks break off in Steelworkers strike in Duluth, Minnesota

Contract talks between ME International, a steel castings producer, and the United Steelworkers (USW) in Duluth, Minnesota broke off November 22 in the fourteenth week of a strike. According to USW Local 1028 wages are not a major issue. Instead, the 145 striking workers are determined to make changes in working conditions. The union is also seeking a three-year contract while the company insists on a five-year pact.

Since the walkout on August 25, MEI has hired strikebreakers to keep operations running. Plant manager Wally Mahnke told the *Duluth New-Tribune*, "It looks like we're too far apart, and this isn't going anywhere." The union has indicated it is not interested in mediation. The first collective bargaining agreement at MEI was reached six years ago with the intervention of a mediator. "It left us with kind of a bad taste in our mouth," said Local 1028 President Bruce Lotti.

Bus drivers vote for one-day strike in San Francisco

School bus drivers in the San Francisco area voted for a one-day strike November 22 against the Laidlaw Company. The union has set December 1 as the day for the shutdown. Laidlaw provides transportation for some 9,000 students.

Non-union drivers rebel in Overnite strike

The Teamsters union reports that Overnite Transportation's nonunion company drivers used as strikebreakers in the Chicago area rebelled against their being used as "pawns" in the five-week strike.

Overnite has been drawing "volunteer" drivers from its nonunion operations to haul cargo out of terminals where workers have voted to unionize. According to the Teamsters, on November 22 "volunteer" drivers in Chicago told the company they were going home, with or without permission. When drivers returned to their hotels to check out they found they had been locked out—evidently the result of orders by Overnite to hotel management. The drivers called police in order to get the rooms opened to recover their belongings.

"We're just pawns in Overnite's game," one driver said. "I'm sick of it. I miss my family, I'm sick of eating sandwiches on the dock, I'm sick of living at the dock and in the hotel room."

The Teamsters claim to represent 3,600 Overnite drivers and dockworkers at 37 terminals out of a total of 8,000 workers at 166 terminals. A subsidiary of Union Pacific Railway, Overnite is the nation's sixth largest trucking company and the largest of the nonunion carriers.

Explosion at Kansas factory injures six workers

Six workers were injured in an explosion at a plant in Maize, Kansas on November 21. The blast occurred in the Coleman Beacon factory's west building where workers fill propane bottles. Three workers suffered second and third-degree burns. Another three workers incurred minor injuries. Authorities are investigating the cause of the explosion.

American Airways flight attendants threaten Christmas strike

American Airways flight attendants picketed major East Coast

airports over the Thanksgiving weekend to warn that they might launch a strike during the Christmas holiday if they don't obtain a fair contract. The previous Monday, November 22, the Association of Flight Attendants asked the National Mediation Board to declare negotiations at an impasse, paving the way for a 30-day cooling off period that could then be followed by a strike.

American Airways' 10,000 flight attendants have been without a contract or raise since 1996. They are seeking improvements in the paltry \$17,145 a year starting salary. The company is seeking to cut vacation time and sick leave.

Building trades agree to random drug tests in Milwaukee

The building trades unions agreed to random drug testing for skilled tradesman in the Milwaukee area starting January 1. Each year 15 percent of workers in the carpenters, cement masons, pile drivers, bricklayers and building laborers will be tested. Any worker whose urine, blood or breath tests prove positive will be required to take up to 30 days of unpaid leave for substance abuse treatment.

The unions maintain the agreement protects the job of a worker who tests positive and that beyond the individual involved, only the union and the employer will know test results. Dennis Penkalski, business manager for the Southern Wisconsin District Council of Carpenters in Pewaukee, claimed that 95 percent of the membership supported the plan.

The construction bosses have sought to scapegoat workers for the high rate of injuries among building tradesmen, claiming that drug testing is a safety measure which will reduce accidents. OSHA statistics reveal that there were 9.9 injuries per 100 full-time construction workers, a rate 45 percent higher than for private sector workers in general. The rates for carpenters and masons run even higher—12.1 and 10.3 per 100.

Inco lockout continues

Nickel giant Inco has declared *force majeure* in the 10-week lockout of its workforce in Thompson, Manitoba, formally notifying its customers that it will not be able to honor supply contracts because there isn't enough nickel being produced. Robert Desjarlais, president of United Steelworkers Local 6166, said, "This is a declaration they're incurring heavy losses." But Manford Mallory, an analyst with Toronto's Research Capital Corp., said that "about 75 percent of [Inco's] operations are enjoying better prices thanks to the strike."

The price of nickel has climbed 7 cents to a three-year high at \$3.64. Nickel inventories are at their lowest in 10 years, as new Australian mines try and deal with huge operating problems and the strike at the Inco, Manitoba section keeps supply off the market. Inco's Manitoba division carries about 4.5 percent of the global nickel production.

More than 1,000 members of Local 6166 were locked out on September 15, when the union rejected the company's proposal for a three-year wage freeze. The union is asking for a 4 to 6 percent wage increase and pensions on par with Inco workers at the Sudbury division. Inco has been holding firm as the eventual contract with Thompson workers will set a precedent for future negotiations at the company's larger operation in Sudbury, Ontario. The contract with workers at the Sudbury division expires next spring.



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