

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 December 1999

Social Security strike continues in El Salvador

Defying anti-strike laws and facing attacks from the media, Salvadoran social security workers are standing firm in their campaign against the privatization of health insurance. Polls indicate that 80 percent of the population support the strikers. President Francisco Flores has declared that no striking worker would share in the \$115 million bonus for state employees. However, last Tuesday about 1,000 strikers were fired. Among the fired workers are doctors, nurses and administrative and managerial employees. The government disputed the strikers' figures and claimed that only 226 had been fired.

Indian mobilizations in Honduras

The Indian tribes of Honduras announced mobilizations against the policies of the government of Carlos Flores. Salvador Zuniga, leader of the Lenca tribe, declared that the government is pursuing policies that deliberately exclude the tribal inhabitants of the impoverished regions of Intibuca, Lempira, and La Paz from receiving economic help and services such as clean drinking water, education and medical assistance.

Gastrointestinal disease and malnutrition are causing a rise in infant mortality, according to Zuniga. "Our brothers and sisters are suffering from the worse marginalization of their history. To this we have to add the stealing of their land by landlords and the army. For that reason, the struggle will be permanent and long so that the powerful will listen to and heed our demands," said Zuniga.

Mexican farmers demand debt cancellation

One hundred representatives of the Democratic Farmers Union and the El Barzon debtors organization demanded that Mexico's legislature assign a larger budget to agriculture and that it cancel the farm debt. Mexican farmers owe an average of \$6,500 each.

While the delegates were pressing the legislators, 30 mounted riders from the Horse Ride for Rural Dignity and 500 of their supporters demonstrated. The riders had left 59 days before from the northern State of Chihuahua to popularize their campaign. They set up camp with their horses outside the Congress and stayed for four days, promising to return for a national day of protest scheduled for December 13.

Argentine farmers strike

Farmers from the Argentine province of La Rioja struck last Saturday to demand lower electricity prices. They make intensive use of electricity to operate their irrigation pumps. Additionally, they are demanding lower taxes. Farmer leader Mario Gonzales pointed out that the provincial government wasted no time in rescuing a La Rioja bank but has done nothing to resolve the issues raised by farmers. La Rioja produces cotton, olives and wine grapes.

Locked out New York City ballet musicians rally

Orchestra musicians from New York City Ballet and their supporters rallied in Manhattan December 2 to call for an end to the lockout by the State Theater at Lincoln Center. The 70-member orchestra, whose contract expired last September, went on strike November 30 in its first walkout in 23 years.

Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians has indicated its willingness to work during the holiday season while negotiating management's demands for increased rehearsal and performance time. However, management demanded that the orchestra continue playing until

the spring, in case they were still not able to reach a settlement. Since the union is willing to end the strike immediately and perform, their officials assert that they now consider the orchestra to be locked out by the City Ballet. After canceling the first performance of the season, Lincoln Center has used taped music during performances of the Nutcracker ballet.

Overnite accuses Teamsters of violence, demands end to strike

Overnite Transportation demanded an end to the six-week strike by Teamsters truck drivers and has accused the union of provoking violence against nonunion drivers. Overnite offered a \$1 million reward after one of its drivers was shot December 1 near Memphis, Tennessee.

The Teamsters, which has denied any involvement with the shooting, has been involved in a long and drawn-out struggle over several years to gain representation rights at Overnite, a subsidiary of Union Pacific and the nation's sixth largest trucking company. The union claims to represent 3,600 Overnite drivers and dockworkers at 37 terminals out of a total of 8,000 workers at 166 terminals. Of this group, it is believed that some 2,000 are striking.

The Unfair Labor Practices strike is based on admissions by a former Overnite operations manager, Dale Watson, who charges Overnite systematically singled out rank-and-file union supporters for harassment and firing. Watson alone admitted to victimizing more than 40 Overnite workers. The Teamsters report that over 1,000 individual violations have been filed with the NLRB against Overnite for unlawful conduct, including intimidation, harassment, and unlawful discharge.

Overnite has now spent an estimated \$26 million on strike contingency plans, an amount almost equaling its profits of \$27.6 million for the first three quarters of 1999. With its charges of "strike violence" the company is pressing for the authorities to intervene to arrest militant workers and intimidate strikers. For their part Teamsters officials have done nothing to seriously mobilize the support of rank-and-file truckers throughout the industry against such an attack.

Chiefly concerned with getting access to the company's pension funds and slowing down the continued loss of dues-paying members, the Hoffa leadership has limited the struggle to appeals to the National Labor Relations Board and big business politicians. On the same day as the shooting, Vice President Al Gore appeared with union officials on the picket line at Overnite's terminal in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Gore is courting the Teamsters bureaucracy to support for his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Boeing tech workers rebuff contract

Engineers and technicians delivered a strong rebuff to Boeing Corporation's contract offer December 2 and granted strike authorization to their union by a 3-1 margin. Members of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), Boeing's second largest union next to the Machinists, voted by a 98 percent margin against the proposal.

The new contract required members to pay 10 percent of their medical premiums starting January 1, 2001. In the recent contract between Boeing and the Machinists union, the company agreed to continue full coverage of premiums. Early retirees would lose medical benefits under the defeated agreement and workers faced mandatory weekend work without overtime pay. The proposal contained wage increases averaging 17

percent spread out over a four-year agreement, but SPEEA complained that the agreement failed to provide a similar signing bonus such as the 10 percent received by machinists.

Some 21,000 workers are covered by the agreement. But only a small portion of them were dues paying members and these were the only ones eligible to vote. Overall disenchantment with the proposal led to the union enrolling another 3,000 members in the last four months. SPEEA now has 13,148 dues-paying members, about 57 percent of the employee group. But SPEEA President Craig Buckham has declared that a strike against Boeing is neither a "first option, or even a second option." New talks are expected with possible federal mediation.

Government blocks holiday strike at US Airways

The union representing 10,000 flight attendants at US Airways has agreed to return to the bargaining table under orders from the National Mediation Board (NMB). The decision puts an end to earlier talk of a strike during the Christmas to New Year's holiday season.

Such a strike would have had a considerable impact against US Airways, the nation's sixth-largest airline based in Arlington, Virginia. Talks between the union and company have dragged on since the contract expired at the end of 1996 and are presently deadlocked over wages, vacation and sick leave. The Association of Flight Attendants asked for a release from mediation on November 22 which, if granted, would have started a 30-day cooling-off period culminating in a strike on the eve of the year-end holiday season. With the NMB's decision new talks will begin December 13.

Major League umpires vote in new union

Major League umpires voted 57-35 November 30 to form a new union in a National Labor Relations election. The vote brings an end to the domination of the union by attorney Richie Phillips over the last 21 years. Three American League Umpires—John Hirschbeck, Joe Brinkman and Dave Phillips—led the opposition to Richie Phillips and union President Jerry Crawford. Their emergence to a position of strength came in the wake of the collapse of the former union's attempt to use mass resignations during last summer's baseball season as a form of pressure to obtain early talks with baseball owners. A section of umpires abandoned the union and withdrew their resignations. The move started a stampede which led all umpires to follow suit. The baseball owners took advantage of the debacle to refuse to return resignations to 22 umpires who lost their jobs to replacements from the minor leagues.

Phillips and Crawford believed that when the umpires' contract expired at the end of this year the baseball owners would lock them out. The mass resignations during the 1999 season was seen as a way to get around a no-strike clause in the umpires' contract and force early negotiations. The deposed union will still continue to seek reinstatement of the 22 victimized umpires. Their grievances come before an arbitrator December 13-16.

Minnesota state government workers reject contract

The Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE) voted 73 to 27 to reject the state's most recent contract offer. Some 5,000 of the organization's 7,000 members took part in the balloting. MAPE President Jim Monroe said the contract rejection amounted to "a basic level of frustration and aggravation." The union was bargaining for a 4 percent raise in each year of a two-year agreement. The Minnesota state government offered raises of 2.5 and 3 percent—the same increases offered to the 19,000 members of the State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union. MAPE points out as justification for the higher percentage increase that its professional members do not receive overtime as do AFSCME members.

The union is sending out strike authorization ballots and anticipates counting them December 13-15. Union bylaws require a 60 percent margin in order to launch a strike. Up to this point the state has not called for new negotiations to get under way before the balloting is complete.

MAPE's contract expired June 30 and negotiations have taking place since May.

Mayor's office intervenes to head off San Francisco school bus strike

The United Transportation Union and San Francisco city negotiators reached an agreement aimed at heading off a city-wide strike of school bus drivers. Mayor Willie Brown's office intervened to help mediate the conflict, which involved 300 drivers employed by the Laidlaw bus company. Drivers had voted to go out on strike Tuesday, December 7. No details of the agreement were disclosed pending a vote by union members on Monday, December 6.

Molson workers continue occupation of Ontario brewery

The occupation of the Molson Brewery in Barrie, Ontario by 30 unionized workers is now entering its third week. Workers are protesting the shutdown of the facility scheduled for next September and the lack of any guarantees of employment at the Etobicoke Brewery in Toronto.

Molson recently sent a letter to workers informing them of the possibility that 70 workers might find jobs at the Lakeport Brewing Company in Hamilton. John Macdonald, vice-president of corporate affairs at Molson, said that the company had negotiated preferential hiring for its Barrie workers as part of its co-packing arrangement with Lakeport, adding that wages would be the same as that of Barrie workers. But Terry McIsaac, vice-president of Canadian Auto Workers Local 306, said, "There's nothing there, no guarantees, it doesn't mean anything."

The union representing the 350 unionized workers is demanding preferential hiring into the Etobicoke plant, as well as enhanced early-retirement provisions for workers 50 or over and an enhanced severance for workers who want to leave. Molson had said that there would only be about 50 part-time and temporary jobs available at the Etobicoke brewery. However McIsaac disputes this figure, claiming that there will be between 100 to 150 positions available in Etobicoke.

In the meantime other union locals' members have pitched in to supplement Barrie Molson workers' strike pay of \$180 a week to bring it to \$360.



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