

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 December 1999

Salvadoran president insists on privatizations despite massive protests

While Salvadoran President Francisco Flores visited Miami following his attendance at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization, thousands of healthcare workers marched through San Salvador protesting his plans to privatize the healthcare system. Upon his return, he insisted that privatizations would go ahead. Tensions between healthcare workers, who have been on strike for three weeks, and the government continue to intensify.

Mexican workers burn ranch after not being paid

About 300 agricultural workers took over and burned the ABC ranch in San Quentin, Tijuana last Wednesday, after not being paid in over a month. The protest began when officials from the company failed to respond to the request by worker delegates for the back pay. Twice this year ABC had either been late in paying wages or handed out checks that bounced. The fire began in the ABC greenhouses, spread to the chemical warehouse, then to the offices. ABC exports vegetables.

Honduran peasants block roads

About 10,000 peasants from 120 towns in the Santa Barbara region took over the occidental highway in Honduras last Wednesday. The protesters were demanding schools, health services, electricity and road repairs. Hurricane Mitch heavily damaged the Santa Barbara area. The Honduran government had promised to provide these services, but has failed to deliver. Oscar Mejia, a spokesperson for the protesters, indicated that for over a year they have been petitioning the Honduran government to no avail. The protesters sealed the border with Guatemala and blocked the entry of all vehicles.

Mexican pensioners protest after politicians receive large pensions

Hundreds of retired workers rallied in Mexico City against the granting of excessive pensions to officials of the Zedillo government. The pensioners were reacting to news that Commerce Secretary Jose Angel Gurria and others had taken advantage of loopholes in the social security system and were being granted extraordinary pensions. Gurria will retire after 20 years of service at 77 percent of his current salary.

The protesters are members and supporters of the National Movement of Retired Persons and Pensioners (MUNJP). The MUNJP is demanding that all retired people get a minimum pension of about \$300 a month. MUNJP leader Blanca Alonso Tejada described the inequity that retired Mexican workers face: "Some of the workers only get 80 to 120 pesos (US\$8-12) a month. Who can live on that? Meantime, Mr. Gurria will receive the equivalent of what 85,000 pensioners get."

Ninety percent of Mexico's pensioners receive the minimum benefit of 1,470 pesos (\$147 dollars). For widows the situation is even worse, since they only receive 90 percent of the husbands' pensions. Furthermore, about 4 million elderly people receive no pension at all. Mexico's "social security reform" has left many retired workers with nothing, because they had officially not worked for at least 15 years.

Under the new system, current workers have individual private accounts and no longer contribute taxes to maintain the benefits of those who retired under the old system. Existing pensions, as well as disability benefits, are also being eroded by inflation. By some estimates, 66 million Mexicans live in extreme poverty, which is defined as not having enough

money to buy a basket of 38 basic foodstuffs necessary for a proper nutrition.

Flight attendant contract talks at Northwest Airlines break off

Officials for Northwest Airlines have denounced a December 7 proposal by union negotiators seeking "industry level" wages and benefits for the airlines' 11,000 flight attendants. The National Mediation Board, which is overseeing the talks, has indefinitely recessed negotiations.

Bob Brodin, Northwest vice president of labor relations, said in a prepared statement, "We had hoped that their proposal would have been the starting point for reaching an agreement expeditiously, but in fact their proposal is nearly triple the cost of the June tentative agreement, which would have made Northwest flight attendants among the best-paid flight attendants in the industry."

Flight attendants defeated the June proposal by a 69 percent margin last August. The tentative pact was strongly endorsed by both Teamsters Local 2000 President Billie Davenport and Teamsters International President James P. Hoffa. The rebuff led Local 2000 to implement a wider consultation of workers, including members of the Contract Action Team (CAT) who were largely responsible for mobilizing opposition to last summer's contract.

According to Local 2000, the union proposal was to have "covered all wage and compensation aspects at industry-leading levels, including pay rates, retro pay, boarding pay, ground holding pay, overtime pay, holiday pay for all holidays, and short crew compensation." Flight attendants at Northwest have been without a contract since 1996.

New York City Ballet musicians accept contract

The musicians at the New York City Ballet accepted a contract last Tuesday by a vote of 43 to 19, thereby ending a two-week strike. The major issue in the conflict was work rules. Under the terms of the old contract, musicians were able to find substitutes for rehearsals and performances. Since the orchestra members earned, according to the union, a base salary of \$35,000 per year for 23 weeks of work, the musicians had other jobs to supplement their income.

The Ballet Company was demanding that new musicians be required to attend six performances and two rehearsals a week, while current musicians could continue with the old work rules. Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians rejected any proposal that would create two sets of scheduling rules.

While the new contract provides for the same scheduling requirements for all the musicians, it gives management the bulk of its demands. All the musicians will now be required to attend at least three-quarters of the rehearsals and 70 percent of the performances. They are also compelled to attend all the performances of certain designated works, like premieres and the more complex pieces. In addition the music director will have the right to prevent performances if he feels that there are too many substitutes. In addition, the musicians are all required to sign a clause stating that they agree that the City Ballet is their primary source of income. The new contract also calls for a 3.7 percent increase the first year, and 3.5 percent each of the next two years.

A senior executive of the Ballet Company, Christopher Ramsey, said that he was "ecstatic" about the deal. He also said, "The artistic staff feels like its been handed the keys to a new Ferrari." On the other hand, a

spokeswoman for the union, Judy West, commenting on the contract, said, "We can live with it."

During the strike, the company was able to continue its performances with the use of taped music, and ticket sales remained high during the holiday season. This was made possible because unionized dancers and other professionals continued working. A spokesman for these unions contended that they were compelled to continue working due to a no-strike clause in their contracts.

Pennsylvania teachers strike ends

Teachers and some 3,000 students in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, returned to classes December 10 after union and school officials reached an agreement in a five-week strike. The Phoenixville Area Education Association ratified the contract the night before. School board members are set to vote on the proposal December 11.

The four-year agreement calls for 3.6 percent annual raises and requires teachers to make a \$20 monthly contribution towards healthcare premiums. The union and school board had been negotiating for two years.

UAW workers strike Iowa crane manufacturer

United Auto Workers members continue to walk picket lines at Terex Corporation's crane manufacturing plant in Waverly, Iowa, near Cedar Falls. The 175 union workers walked off the job December 6. Terex continues to run the plant with 52 nonunion employees and is threatening to call up 64 laid-off workers to cross picket lines and continue manufacturing at the struck plant.

Since Terex took over the former Koehring Cranes plant in the early 1990s, workers have only had a 25-cent raise. In 1993, Terex laid off 150 workers and there was a weeklong strike in 1995 that brought little in rewards for workers. The company dropped a free health insurance program and penalized workers for early retirement on their pensions. Terex workers presently make an average \$12.31 an hour. The union is asking for 5 percent yearly raises, free medical benefits for retirees and full pensions for those who work 30 years.

One striker told the *Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier*, "Since Terex took over, it's been downhill all the way. Corporate greed has just taken over. Ask them anything, and you better have a Bible. They'll look you in the eye and stab you in the back at the same time. They'd make good politicians."

West Virginia home care workers set to strike

Union negotiators and officials representing the Putnam Aging Program will meet one last time December 13 in an attempt to reach a tentative agreement. Without a pact, 50 home healthcare workers are slated to go on strike the following day.

The caregivers, primarily part-time, are demanding a 50-cent hourly wage increase. The company and the Health Care and Social Service Union District 1199 remain divided on workers' demands for health insurance, paid time off and recognition of drivers as part of the bargaining unit.

Machinists' strike continues against Iowa toolmaker

Striking members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) enter their sixth week on strike against Sioux Tools Inc. in Sioux City, Iowa. Workers, presently receiving hourly rates up to \$8 an hour, have been without a raise since the last contract in 1996 and are opposed to a two-tier wage system implemented at that time. New hires after November 1996 received lower pay. Sioux Tools is a subsidiary of Wisconsin-based Snap-on Inc.

UMWA leaders persuade Cape Breton coal miners to end occupation

On Tuesday, December 7 about 250 coal miners occupied the head office of their employer, Cape Breton Development Corp., to demand better severance packages when their state-owned mine is closed. The occupation lasted most of the day, resulting in the shutdown of mining

activity at the Prince mine and stopping the recovery of equipment at the Phalen colliery. But before the day had ended, the miners, members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were talked into leaving by their union leaders, who claimed that it was in the workers' best interests.

It has been almost a year since the federal government in Ottawa announced that it was pulling out of the coal mining business in Cape Breton, and privatizing the Prince mine and closing the Phalen mine. Many of the protesting miners work at the Phalen colliery, scheduled to close December 21.

Workers are demanding a meeting with federal Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale, to discuss severance pay and unsatisfactory pension packages for the 1,100 workers who will lose their jobs when the federal Crown Corporation closes. In addition the workers are demanding federal job-creation programs for displaced workers. The federal government has refused to budge from its original offer of \$111 million in pensions and severance payments for laid-off workers.

Also scheduled to be closed is the New Waterford Mine, which opened in 1987 and once employed 1,000 workers.

12-week lockout ends at Inco's Thompson mine

A contract agreement was ratified last Thursday by locked-out workers at Inco's Thompson, Manitoba mine. The workers, members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local 6166, were locked out on September 15, due to a dispute over pensions and wages. Of the 1,065 workers at the mine, 890 voted, with 66 percent in favor of the deal.

The contract provides a 5 percent wage increase over three years, a 13 percent increase in pension benefits and a \$1,000 signing bonus. The Thompson deal is expected to have a significant effect on negotiations at Inco's mine and smelter operations in Sudbury, Ontario, where the contract for 4,300 workers expires next June.

Inco's Manitoba spokesman, Dan McSweeney, said, "We believe the agreement meets the needs of our employees and, at the same time, with the productivity improvements built into it, the agreement creates opportunities for Inco Manitoba to remain competitive and be a viable operation in the future." One of these productivity enhancements is extended shifts.

Toronto Symphony Orchestra musicians ratify deal

An 11-week-old strike by Toronto Symphony Orchestra musicians ended just as the symphony's busiest season began. The musicians were demanding wage parity with major US orchestras. Of the 94 orchestra members, 88 voted in favor of the new contract that raises salaries by 29.8 percent, increasing the minimum salary from \$53,169 to \$69,000. The TSO musicians will now be the highest paid in Canada. The musicians have been on strike since talks broke down on September 25. At the time the musicians rejected a proposed three-year pact that still left their salaries at \$30,000-\$40,000 a year less than fellow orchestra members in major US cities such as New York or Philadelphia.

Workers ratify deal ending Molson brewery occupation

The three-week occupation of Molson's Barrie, Ontario brewery ended on Sunday, as 91 percent of the members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 306 voted in favor of a memorandum agreement with Molson Canada.

On November 21, 30 workers at the Barrie brewery initiated the occupation after Molson officials walked out of negotiations with the union. Workers were primarily demanding better severance packages for the plant's 350 workers as well as transfers to another Molson brewery in Etobicoke instead of layoffs when the brewery shuts down in September of next year.

Under the agreement up to 70 Barrie workers could find employment at the Lakeport Brewing Corporation in Hamilton through a preferential hiring agreement, although workers had asked for transfers to the Molson Brewery in Etobicoke. Previously Molson had offered a severance package that would include an average cash pay-out of \$90,000 to

\$200,000 above and beyond wages, until next September when the plant closes. Under the ratified agreement Molson will offer pension bridging, whereby workers 50 years of age and older can receive partial pensions until age 55, when their full pensions begin. A 45-year-old worker, with 25 years in the company, would receive \$74,000 total severance under the agreement.

Molson will also create a \$750,000 job adjustment committee, made up of company and union representatives, in order to provide career services for workers. "Our membership is pleased with what we've done," claimed union executive, Hemi Mitic. The CAW has called off their province-wide boycott of Molson products.



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