

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 January 2000

Argentine teachers end 1,003-day protest

On December 30, Argentine teachers took down a massive white tent that had been set up in front of the National Congress since April 2, 1997. The tent had been erected for 1,003 days to protest the government's failure to act on legislation that would have raised teachers' salaries. During that time, 1,400 teachers took turns in rotating hunger strikes.

The teachers union declared victory when the Fernando de la Rúa administration passed tax increases and a budget that would give teachers incentive bonuses of \$60 (US) a month. Critics, however, pointed out that middle- and low-income people would bear the brunt of the tax increases, while the wealthy exploited available loopholes. Meanwhile, the De la Rúa government welcomed the tent's dismantling as part of its declared intention of making the Argentine economy "investment grade" in year 2000.

Ecuadorian public employees take over ministries

Employees of the ministries of Foreign Relations and Agriculture took over their buildings last Monday in Quito. They are demanding the elimination of a law that cuts retirement benefits by 40 percent for workers who have accrued 30 years seniority. At the same time, the workers are protesting the National Council on Wages' paltry "cost of living bonus" that will do little to offset a 55 percent increase in prices. Currently, Ecuador has the highest inflation rate in Latin America.

Increasing resistance to Fujimori's reelection bid in Peru

The Broad Front, representing many unions, has called for a mass protest in Lima this Wednesday to oppose Peruvian President Fujimori's plan to run for a third term and his neo-liberal economic policies. Following Fujimori's announcement that he would seek another term, protest marches and vigils took place in many cities, including Jaen, Huaraz, Arequipa and Trujillo. In Cerro de Pasco large murals were painted, saying, "Fujimori illegal" and "No to Fujimori's reelection."

Social security workers walk out at another two hospitals in El Salvador

Hospitals in the departments of San Miguel and Usulután in eastern El Salvador have joined the 44-day strike of Social Security workers. San Miguel is the second largest city in the country. The workers have announced that they will increase their pressure on the government after January 3 to stop the privatization of health and other government services.

Teamsters officials tell Northwest flight attendants not to take job action

On January 1 Teamsters officials warned Northwest Airlines' 11,000 flight attendants against calling in sick to protest recent failed contract negotiations. The announcement came as Northwest was forced to cancel more than 30 percent of its flight schedule for the New Year's weekend.

Northwest attributed the cancellations to weak demand and an

anticipated large number of passenger "no-shows" and crew shortages. While all airlines experienced reductions in schedules due to fear of interference with normal flying due to Y2K issues, Northwest experienced a 20 percent increase in sick calls—a figure that translates into about 11,000 workers in the airline's cabin crews.

"It is imperative that flight attendants of Northwest Airlines do not participate in any illegal work action by calling in sick during this holiday season," announced Teamsters Local 2000 President Billie Davenport. "We must conduct ourselves in a professional manner and fly our trips as assigned if we are not indeed sick. The union will not sanction any illegal job actions or sick-out." Davenport also alluded to the \$45 million fine imposed on American Airlines pilots for their sick-out in February 1999.

The company followed up with a threat to fire any attendant who engaged in an illegal work stoppage or slowdown. Contract talks between the union and company officials were adjourned by a federal mediator in the first part of December, indicating that more time will be added to the already drawn-out talks. Negotiations have been going on for the past three and a half years.

Tentative contracts at Sprint

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) and Sprint Corporation reached tentative agreements December 31 for three-year contracts covering 2,850 workers in North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana and Oregon. Another 650 workers in Florida did not receive a proposal and negotiations continued through the New Year's weekend.

Sprint workers had voted 9-1 to take strike action if favorable contracts were not produced. There is no central bargaining strategy on the part of the CWA. All the contracts vary and details are not available. According to the CWA Sprint wanted to take away a paid holiday, reduce wage increases for newer employees in training, trim severance pay and prevent employees from receiving the benefit of hiring preferences for new job openings.

Tentative agreement averts strike for Minnesota government workers

State negotiators and the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE) reached a tentative agreement December 27, minutes before a strike deadline that could have resulted in the 7,200-member union crippling the state's financial and computer divisions during the Y2K rollover.

Despite the threat, the union failed to come away with its demand for 4 percent raises over the course of a two-year contract. Instead the union's negotiators accepted the state's original proposal for yearly raises of 2½ and 3 percent respectively. The state's offer had galvanized union members who voted in November by 73 to 27 percent to reject and followed up with a 69 percent strike vote in the middle of December. A 10-day cooling-off period set the stage for a strike which would have involved computer technicians, accountants, statisticians, financial analysts, parole and probation officers, meat and dairy inspectors, state hospital therapists and middle management.

The wage increases are the same as those received by the 19,000-member AFSCME union earlier in the year. State officials reacted harshly against the union's 4 percent demand. State Commissioner of Employee Relations Wayne Simoneau, a former official in the Carpenter's union, issued a three-page memo warning MAPE members that if they went on strike they would lose pay, life and health insurance, disability coverage, sick leave and other benefits. The *Star Tribune* newspaper warned: "If MAPE's demand for a 4 percent increase in each of two years were granted, pressure would build throughout the public sector for budget-busting pay increases."

MAPE members respond that they often put in 65-hour weeks and skip breaks to complete their work. And unlike AFSCME members, they receive no overtime. The value of this donated labor comes to an estimated \$10 million a year. The 4 percent wage increases would have added up to only \$8 million over the life of the two-year contract.

MAPE did extract an additional \$6-7 million in the final negotiations that will be used for a .55 percent increase in 2001 for 3,000 senior workers. They will also be eligible for merit raises annually instead of every two years. Nonacademic employees of the State College and Universities system had three-year probation periods cut to one and two years depending on job category. It is not clear whether employees will have to make increased contributions to their medical plans.

Mail balloting by union members to cast a final vote on the contract is expected to take about three weeks.

New Talks at US Airways under shadow of strike vote

The flight attendants union and US Airways management are scheduled to resume contract negotiations January 3 under the supervision of the National Mediation Board (NMB). The new talks come after flight attendants voted 6,571 to 91 to strike if talks with the nation's sixth largest carrier fail to produce an agreement.

US Airways' 10,000 flight attendants have been working under a contract that expired back in 1996. On November 22 of 1999 the union asked the NMB to declare an impasse after three years of negotiations with the idea of launching a holiday strike. The NMB refused the request and immediately ordered new talks for December 13. The talks were later recessed for the holidays.

Student doctors in Boston hospital get federal union

Residents and interns at the Boston Medical Center voted 177-1 December 21 to unionize under a federal union. The Committee of Interns and Residents, affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, was already recognized by the hospital. But the vote comes after the National Labor Relations Board ended its 23-year ruling that residents and interns are in the main students and had no collective bargaining rights.

The new NLRB ruling agrees that doctors-in-training who provide basic care at private hospitals should have the same rights as other workers to form a union. With cost-cutting and staff reductions, profit-driven hospitals have sought to increase their exploitation of residents and interns. Many face long working hours, increased assignments formerly done by nurses and the lack of decent working conditions such as proper rooms for sleeping when on call.

The Committee of Interns and Residents represents just under 10,000 doctors-in-training in selected states throughout the US. It is estimated that some 90,000 residents and interns work in private hospitals across the country.

Provincial government in British Colombia locks out BC Rail

workers

Provincially-owned BC Rail has been shutdown since December 27, when the company locked out its 2,000 workers in response to a strike notice served by unions on Christmas Eve. Discussions between the company and the Council of Trade Unions, which represents the railway's seven unions, have made no progress. The Council has accused BC Rail's Chief Executive Officer Paul McElligot of vetoing a tentative proposal. BC Rail has denied this. BC Rail spokesman, Alan Dever, said that the talks ended because the union didn't accept the company's proposals for productivity improvements, adding that the company must find savings to compensate for the 2 percent wage increase previously offered.

The unions have accepted the provincial wage offer of 2 percent in the final year of a three-year contract, the first wage increase for the rail workers in five years. But they turned down BC Rail's plan to eliminate 20 percent of the unionized workforce and a proposal for a two-tiered wage structure that would give new hires lower wages until they have accrued a set number of hours. BC Rail claims these measures are necessary to remain profitable and offset the cost of the 2 percent wage increase.

The unions and some businesses have called on the trade union-supported New Democratic Party government to intervene, but BC Premier Dan Miller has so far taken no actions. Talks that had been held last week with a provincial mediator have since broken down with no resumption of discussions scheduled.

This is the third labor dispute to affect the port of Vancouver in the past year. Last summer a truckers' strike slowed down shipment at the port. This was followed by a lockout of 2,000 dock workers in November.

BC's large corporate concerns, including the forestry industry and coal mining, have pressured the provincial government to intervene and settle the dispute. Due to a lack of shipping alternatives, Vancouver-based mining Teck Corp. says it may have to lay off some of the 750 employees at its Quintette and Bullmoose coal operations in the northeastern town of Tumbler Ridge if the lockout continues much longer. BC Rail operates more than 1,500 kilometers of track from Vancouver to Fort Nelson.

On December 31, in an effort to get back to the bargaining table, the unions followed through on their threats to escalate their job action, closing the Roberts Bank coal port south of Vancouver. The mammoth port, which is operated by Westshore Terminals Ltd., handles southeastern BC coal destined for Asian customers. Although CP Rail and CN Rail operate the coal trains, the track leading to the port is controlled by BC Port. Coal is one of BC Rail's key commodity shipments. Although prior to the lockout Westshore had an estimated 1 million ton stockpile of coal available to load, unionized longshore workers refused to cross the railway pickets and those who were working walked out.

The BC Federation of Labour, which represents 450,000 unionized workers across the province, has joined the employers in appealing to the NDP government to take action to end the dispute. Rail workers have been without a contract for two years



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