

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 January 2000

Mexican students reject accord

The eight-month-long Mexican student strike continues. The strike has shut down UNAM, Mexico's largest university, since April 20, 1999.

On January 8 strikers rejected the latest proposal from the government, which claims that it has conceded to most of the students' demands, including the creation of an elected university assembly in which 38 percent of the representatives would be students. The strikers are demanding a majority. The government is also proposing to suspend the university's relationship with CENEVAL, a testing service, another demand of the students.

The students are refusing to consider the offer unless those arrested at the December 11 protest rally in front of the US Embassy are first freed.

Seven wounded, forty-nine arrested in anti-government protests in Ecuador

On January 7, 49 people were arrested and 7 wounded as a result of the protests last Thursday night and Friday morning. Three of the wounded were policemen.

The protesters include native organizations, transport unions, and high school and college students. They are demanding that Ecuador's President Jamil Mahuad resign and that a coalition of Indian, peasant and worker organizations, the Catholic Church and the armed forces form an interim government.

The protests took place in the principal cities of Ecuador, while in rural areas, highways were blocked. In the capital of Quito, marchers unsuccessfully fought the police in an attempt to reach the Government Palace.

Indian leader Antonio Vargas declared that an indefinite national strike is to begin on January 15.

Last year the country's inflation reached 60 percent, the highest in the Americas. Ecuador's currency, the sucre, has been devalued again and again. So far in 2000 it has lost another 9 percent of its value, passing the barrier of 25,000 sucres to the dollar, creating conditions of economic desperation for Ecuador's working class and peasantry.

Honduran peasants defend their land

In the rural Cuanchias region of Honduras four peasant cooperatives belonging to the National Federation of Rural Workers (CNTC) vowed to defend their land from sugar and banana companies. These companies are suing the peasants for illegally occupying their plantations in 1995. The peasants insist that the occupation was legal because the owners had abandoned the land.

Martin Enamorado, a 60-year-old peasant, declared, "They can kick us out, but dead. If the landlords want war, they will have it. We are prepared for that."

Peruvian workers march against third Fujimori candidacy

As part of a national protest, 4,000 workers and students marched on the Government Palace in Lima to protest Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's second reelection bid. Thousands more protested in other cities.

Workers entered Plaza Mayor waving red flags and with signs reading, "The constitution is dead." Fujimori was burnt in effigy.

"This is a day of peaceful protest to tell the government that there are people from all classes in our society who are against the illegal attempt to keep Fujimori in power," declared Jose Gorriti, general secretary of the

Peruvian Workers Federation (CGTP).

Temporary restraining order against Northwest flight attendants

Federal Judge Donovan Frank issued a temporary restraining order January 5 to the union representing Northwest Airlines flight attendants to suppress a sick-out by its members to protest failed contract talks in early December. His order specifically bars Teamsters Local 2000 from "calling, permitting, instigating, authorizing, encouraging, participating in, approving of or continuing any disruption of Northwest Airlines' normal airline operations." Northwest is the country's fourth-largest airline.

The action came as a result of a federal lawsuit filed by Northwest on the previous day in which the airline's attorney alleged the sick-out was a disruption of service "in the nature of guerrilla warfare in labor relations." The airline cited statistics that a rash of sick calls started in the middle of December and grew to a peak on December 29, when 1,067 cabin crew members were out, a figure 180 percent above Northwest's 12-month average of 381 flight attendants per day. The sick calls subsided after the New Year, but were still as high as 650 as the company countered with its lawsuit.

Teamsters Local 2000 President Billie Davenport issued a statement at that time to the union's 11,000 flight attendants reminding them of the \$45 million judgment against American Airline pilots last year and saying, "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. 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 is defending the position that the high rate of sick calls was due to sickness and fears over potential Y2K problems.

Judge Frank acknowledged the existence of a flu outbreak but maintained that the sick rate for flight attendants was considerably higher than among other Northwest employee groups. In his written statement he charged, "The union's public posture may be one of denial, but the evidence indicates that its private strategy is one of advocating a concerted 'sick-out.'" He cited an anonymous message on an Internet chat room used by attendants to discuss the contract struggle as supporting his thesis. The message read, in part: "The union is not going to tell you to call in sick and has to request that all show up for work or they can be sued. READ BETWEEN THE LINES and do what YOU feel good about doing ... give NW the service that they deserve!"

Northwest did not specify a figure for damages in its suit. In addition to Local 2000 it names some of the union's officers, negotiators and executive board members along with more than 10 rank-and-file activists.

While the company and the judge have sought to portray the Local 2000 leadership as being at the forefront of the sick-out by flight attendants, the past several months have been characterized by a growing rift between the Teamsters bureaucracy and union members. Davenport, along with Teamsters international President James Hoffa, gave a strong endorsement last summer to a tentative contract that was later rejected by 69 percent of the membership. Many attendants, frustrated as the renewal date for their contract is more than three and a half years old, were critical of the lack of preparedness of the bargaining committee in the December talks and

further angered that an opportunity to strike Northwest during the holidays had been missed. The December talks were halted by the federal mediator and it is rumored it will be several months before they are to be resumed.

Despite the breakdown in talks, the Teamsters union is bound by law to refrain from any job action until the National Mediation Board declares talks at an impasse and a subsequent 30-day cooling-off period has transpired.

Holiday Inn settles discrimination suit involving undocumented workers

A Minneapolis hotel agreed to pay a \$72,000 settlement to nine undocumented workers from Mexico who were fired after successfully organizing a union. The agreement with the Holiday Inn Express Hotel and Suites was reached with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

The hotel's manager called in the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) last October 13 after the successful union drive. Eight of the nine workers were arrested one month before contract negotiations were scheduled to begin. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees union filed an unfair labor practices complaint with the NLRB. The NLRB ruled that the hotel violated agency laws by retaliating against its employees. The EEOC determined that management violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by denying the workers lunch and rest breaks, imposing more rigorous monitoring and productivity schedules and denying them raises after a 90-day probationary period.

The lawsuit against Holiday Inn Express followed new EEOC guidelines that were issued around the time of the arrests. They purport to bar employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants from discriminating against them. Lloyd Zimmerman, a senior trial attorney for the EEOC, said of the new ruling, "We recognize that whether someone is legal or illegal, they have a right to be free from discrimination. You don't leave your rights at the door just because you are an illegal."

The settlement, which did not require Holiday Inn to admit any wrongdoing, amounts to a \$1,000 payment to each worker in compensatory damages along with \$7,000 in back pay. The INS, however, plans to hold hearings against the workers and it is expected that all nine will be deported.

Holiday Inn also signed a two-year contract with the union that calls for a \$7.25 starting wage for housekeepers, with raises at 90 days and one year.

Engineer's union at Boeing threatens slowdown

The union representing Boeing engineers called on its members to "work to rule" after contract talks were temporarily recessed January 5. The 22,600 members of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) rejected a tentative four-year agreement by 98 percent last month, charging the contract raised medical premiums and shorted them a bonus that was given to machinists.

The "work to rule" action exploits the fact that company rules have not been updated to reflect newer work methods developed by employees and is anticipated to cause Seattle-based Boeing a slowdown.

Disenchantment among engineers has led to the union's recruitment of 3,000 additional members since November 1, putting the portion of union members at 60 percent.

Florida Sprint local agrees to tentative agreement

The last of six Sprint union locals reached a tentative agreement with the long distance company. Communications Workers of America Local 3176 in Leesburg, Florida represents 650 Sprint employees out of a total of 2,830 workers in North Carolina, Indiana, Oregon, Tennessee and Virginia who reached tentative agreements the previous week. Neither side disclosed the results of the talks.

Cape Breton miners on wildcat strike

A strike by 1,600 coal miners against the Cape Breton Development Corp. (Devco) in Nova Scotia has entered its second week in defiance of a

back-to-work order by the Canada Industrial Relations Board. A number of miners have taken over offices and an underground mine at Devco and on Sunday some began a hunger strike to save their jobs.

Hundreds of members of the United Mine Workers initially walked off the job in defiance of their own union over a week ago at the Prince mine in Point Aconi, Nova Scotia and the strike soon spread. Devco, which is a crown corporation, closed two mines in Cape Breton last month and plans to sell Prince, following the decision by the federal government to get out of the region's coal industry by the end of this year. Coal mining has historically been a key industry in Cape Breton, and with the government pullout miners will be left with few alternatives for work.

The miners are protesting severance and pension deals accepted by their union along with the mass layoffs. With little hope of saving their jobs, workers are demanding that the \$111 million early retirement and severance package be expanded to include many of the younger workers who are excluded in the pension formula. Workers now occupying the company offices are also demanding direct negotiations with federal Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale.

Three hundred layoff notices were recently received by nonstriking employees of Devco. These employees are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and include office staff, mine examiners and surveyors, all of whom have refused to cross picket lines.

At the outset of the walkout last Monday, the president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which represents the striking miners, announced that the union did not endorse the walkout. Steve Drake asked the miners to report to work for the next shift, saying that there were other ways for them to make their point. Since that time the union has made no public statement regarding their attitude to the wildcat strike, or the back-to-work order.

Strike ends at BC Rail

An eight-day strike and lockout of 1,600 workers ended last Friday, after a tentative deal was reached between provincially-owned BC Rail and the Council of Trade Unions, which represent the seven unions involved.

In response to a strike announcement, BC Rail had locked out striking workers and only returned to the bargaining table with government intervention. Despite the unions' acceptance of provincial wage increase guidelines of 2 percent, the company had refused to sign the agreement unless the employees accepted its demands for a 20 percent workforce reduction and the introduction of a two-tiered wage structure that would give new employees lower pay. In documents leaked to the media BC Rail indicated plans to improve its profitability by slashing \$16 million from total unionized payroll costs of about \$80 million.

BC Rail, which is Canada's third-largest railway, has faced falling profits as a result of a slump in industries it relies upon in British Columbia, such as mining and lumber. In 1998 its profits fell 34 percent to \$26.5 million. In addition it is facing an uncertain future pending the planned \$19 billion merger of its principal competitor, CN, with US rail giant Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp.

While details of the agreement will not be released until the membership of the various unions can vote on it, wage increases will be no more than 2 percent for the current year, the first increase in five years. The new three-year contract will be retroactive to 1997, leaving only one year until a new contract will have to be negotiated.

Teaching assistants strike at University of Toronto

Two thousand four hundred teaching assistants at the University of Toronto went on strike last week following months of negotiations in which the university refused to discuss the union's key demands. While the university recently conceded small wage hikes and job security provisions, the union is asking for tuition rebates, citing a decade of tuition increases. The union is seeking wage parity with its counterparts at

York University in Toronto, who currently receive significant tuition rebates.

Teaching assistants are graduate students who evaluate student assignments and exams, and teach labs, tutorials and some classes. While they can make as much as \$30 an hour, they earn an average of only \$4,100 a year and pay \$5,100 in tuition. They are seeking a 20 percent raise, to about \$36 an hour. The university's last offer was a 2.75 percent raise the first year and 2 percent the second, along with guaranteed four-year appointments instead of the current three years.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3902, which represents the assistants, said the strike could threaten the cancellation of some classes, but cites the intransigence of university negotiators in provoking the strike. The last strike by teaching assistants, in 1991, lasted almost three weeks. In addition, more than 500 groundskeepers and other service workers at U of T are currently in a legal strike position.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact