Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 February 2000

Nicaraguan teachers fight for contract

Jose Antonio Zepeda, leader of the Association of Nicaraguan Educators, has threatened to call a national strike if the Education Ministry continues refusing to negotiate a new contract with the teachers. The teachers association is demanding a 200 percent increase in wages to compensate for the rise in living costs.

Zepeda opposes beginning classes until a contract is in place. He insists that the teachers no longer trust the ministry, as a consequence of repeated violations of past contracts by the government. Union officials believe that if a contract is not in place on February 17, when classes start, the authorities will try to delay negotiations and declare any strike illegal.

A year after the Colombian earthquake, victims demand relief

The inhabitants of Armenia and La Tebaida, in the Colombian coffee region, blocked main roads to demand government relief last week. On January 25, 1999 this region was struck by an earthquake that registered 6.2 on the Richter scale. The disaster left 4,000 dead, 5,000 wounded and a quarter of a million homeless.

Many of the victims are still living in temporary shelters, a full year after the tragedy. Those in shelters report that conditions are deteriorating. The temporary structures no longer protect against the rain and are unbearably hot in the summer. Many victims also complain about the lack of jobs and adequate medical care.

Unrest due to layoffs in Nicaraguan special economic zones

About 50 maquiladora workers, fired from the Mil Colores factory for attempting to organize a union, rallied at the entrance of the special economic zone to demand their jobs back. Jose Domingo Esquivel, former general secretary of the Mil Colores union, indicated that the company began a victimization campaign as soon as the existence of the union became known.

Esquivel was fired along with another 50 workers. The government sided with the company on the firings. Esquivel declared that most of Mil Colores workers support the union and that if the company persists, there will be a strike.

Mil Colores produces clothing that is sold in the United States.

Nicaraguan child workers demand an education

Thirty child workers in Nicaragua petitioned the government agency in charge of services to children and adolescents for the right to an education for child laborers. According to UN statistics, 30 percent of Nicaragua's youth are illiterate. Every year a million children are denied the right to enter elementary school. In that way, 61 percent of the population between the ages of 13 and 24 is left without schooling. In Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, only 18 percent of children go to school. Even in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, the illiteracy rate is very high.

Bolivian labor federation breaks up

The 19 largest Bolivian unions walked out of the twelfth congress of the Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) last week. The unions complained about government control over the country's main labor organization, which includes 63 unions, and irregularities in the election of representatives to the COB leadership.

The parties that form the government coalition, together with Bolivian President Hugo Banzer, have publicly declared their determination to control the COB. They intend to dilute labor opposition to labor reforms that would eliminate independent unions. The stated purpose is to make Bolivian labor cheaper, to attract foreign investments.

The COB Congress met in the city of El Alto, near La Paz, and concluded its deliberations on January 27. Among those that split at the Congress were the teachers unions, the peasant federation, organizations of retirees, five of the ten provincial labor federations, university employees and technical students.

Remaining in the COB are the miners union (much diminished after the privatization of the government mines created 10,000 unorganized miners), oil industry workers (many of whom are now considered private contractors), some 200 workers from the privatized railroads and 100 employees of the Central Bank.

At one time the COB was considered one of the most powerful labor organizations in Latin America.

Overnite files lawsuit against striking Teamsters

Overnite Transportation Company filed a $5.2 million federal lawsuit January 24 against the Teamsters union alleging that the three-month strike against the nation's largest nonunion trucking company is a campaign designed to “put Overnite out of business.” The suit paints a picture of violence by the Teamsters involving 57 acts of attempted murder and 131 acts of extortion and seeks financial remuneration for security expenses, alleged damages and costs of hiring replacement workers.

Teamsters President James Hoffa countered, “This lawsuit is a smokescreen by company officials to distract public and media attention from Overnite's troubling record of harassment and intimidation of its own employees.” The union says it is exploring the possibility of a counterclaim that would hold Overnite responsible for a frivolous lawsuit.

The Teamsters launched the Unfair Labor Practices strike alleging some 1,000 violations of labor law and a campaign of harassment, intimidation and firings aimed at frustrating the union's attempt to organize Overnite drivers and warehouse workers.

Overnite has tried to make an issue of the fact that the Teamsters have not been able to convince a significant section of Overnite workers to join the strike and have been relying on obtaining pickets from other trucking companies.

Meanwhile the Teamsters bureaucracy continued to make its appeal to the profit interests of Overnite's stockholders as well as those of its parent company, the railroad giant Union Pacific. A statement from the union read, “The lawsuit is a further indication that the company is involved in a lengthy labor dispute. Declining corporate revenues show that customers understand that Overnite is engaged in a long-term battle that will continue to disrupt the company's service. Further, corporate shareholders will not continue to support falling stock prices and revenue shortages.” The Teamsters cited Overnite's $13 million fourth-quarter loss and the continual fall of Union Pacific's stock since the strike began on October 24, 1999.

The issue that has deadlocked the Teamsters and Overnite in the unionization drive is the union's demand to take control of the pension funds from the company.

Boeing union sets strike deadline as vote looms

Boeing Company's second largest union, the Society of Professional

Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), announced that if its membership votes down the latest tentative offer it will begin an indefinite strike on February 3. SPEEA also filed two new charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), one of them charging the company never intended to bargain fairly. “Basically, the company has shown no desire to negotiate with us, and our people have decided to do something about it,” declared SPEEA Executive Director Charles Bofferding.

In December both the engineering and technical units of the union voted down an earlier tentative agreement by 98 percent. That deal called for worker contributions to the medical program and failed to provide guaranteed wage increases and bonuses. When SPEEA and Boeing reached a tentative agreement on January 13, the union declared that the company had made “significant changes” and retreated from its threat to reduce benefits. But now the SPEEA leadership is claiming key issues are again a lack of guaranteed pay increases or bonuses and changes in life insurance and other benefits.

Some 22,600 workers will be affected by the outcome of the negotiations. Since August 1999, 4,000 workers signed membership cards to join the union, including 371 workers in the first three weeks of January. SPEEA now represents 62 percent of the overall employee unit.

Feeling the pressure of a possible strike the SPEEA leadership has announced it will meet the day before the tentative strike date with national leaders of the AFL-CIO in Washington DC. Boeing has circulated a memorandum among its workforce revealing it will postpone two meetings with airline customers of the 747 jetliner in early February due to the “high probability” of a strike.

Talks between Steelworkers and Kaiser recessed

Four days of talks between the United Steelworkers (USW) and Kaiser Aluminum Corporation over the 16-month strike and lockout ended January 28 with little more than an agreement to establish dates and a location for future talks. Both sides declared the talks “constructive” but no details were revealed.

Some 3,000 USW members in Washington state, Louisiana and Ohio struck Kaiser on September 30, 1998. On January 14, 1999 the union offered to return to work without a contract but Kaiser locked out the striking workers. The strike was provoked by the company's drive to reduce the workforce by 400 and increase the workday from 8 to 12 hours with no overtime pay.

Laborers union official charged with tax evasion

Arthur Coia, the former general president of the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA), agreed to plead guilty January 27 to defrauding Rhode Island of some $100,000 in taxes in a case involving his purchases of high-priced sports cars.

The case was investigated by the US Department of Labor's Division of Labor Racketeering and the Office of Labor Management Standards while the US Attorney's office carried out the prosecution. They claim that from 1991 to 1997 Coia purchased three Ferrari automobiles that cost between $215,000 and $1,050,000. With the assistance of a group of automobile businesses, Coia registered the cars to addresses in cities other than Barrington, Rhode Island, in order to pay lower excise taxes.

The plea agreement recommends Coia undergo a two-year probation, restitution of about $100,000 in taxes owed Rhode Island and Barrington and a $10,000 fine. Coia also agrees to be barred from playing any role in LIUNA or from being an employee of any other union for five years. However the deal will allow him to remain as the union's president emeritus, giving him a salary of $250,000 a year, the same as he earned as president.

Coia stepped down as general president of LIUNA, which represents 800,000 lower paid construction workers, on January 1, 2000. His agreement with the US Attorney's office came just seven days after the US Justice Department declined to pursue a takeover of the union, claiming it was satisfied with the results of an internal reform program negotiated in 1995. The program resulted in the expulsion, retirement or resignation of 127 union officials alleged to have ties to organized crime.

This is the latest in a serious of scandals involving the labor bureaucracy, including recent revelations about widespread corruption in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union.

Quebec nurses union accepts sell-out contract

Six months after the union ended the strike against the Parti Quebecois government, 600 delegates of the Quebec Federation of Nurses' central body, the Conseil Confédéral, overwhelmingly approved a proposed contract over the weekend. The deal had been recommended by the union leadership and will now be sent to the union's 47,500 nurses for ratification.

This agreement comes after months of negotiations following the collapse of the strike last July. Union officials ended the walkout just at the point when the PQ government was on the defensive and increasingly isolated. This betrayal prompted at least a thousand nurses to break from their umbrella organization in protest. Hostility to the leadership continues with members of the nurses' at Cite de la Sante in Laval currently voting on whether to leave the federation.

Dissatisfaction has already emerged over the agreement which falls well short of demands raised during the strike. Some of the harshest criticism is over broken promises by the union executive that fines of up to $7,000 for each nurse for defying back-to-work orders would be lifted as part of any new deal. Nurses face penalties and fines totaling in the millions of dollars, and there is every indication that these will remain following the agreement.

The proposed contract provides for a 9 percent pay increase over four years, similar to settlements for other public sector workers in Quebec. The deal also does not address the central issues of understaffing and underfunding, which prompted the strike last summer. It is likely that the contract will be ratified since the nurses have little reason to believe their union will fight for a better deal.

In related developments, the Ontario Nurses' Association presented their 38,000 members with an agreement for ratification on Monday, the day in which they were to vote on the proposed contract. This has been interpreted by many nurses as an effort to ram through a deal unpopular with the rank and file. Nurses in Ontario have been without a contract since April 1998.

University of Toronto strikers reach deal

A tentative agreement was announced January 30 between 2,400 striking teaching assistants and the University of Toronto after four days of intensive negotiations. While the contract has yet to be ratified by union members, picketing at the university has been suspended.

The teaching assistants, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3902, have been on strike since January 7 over job security and wage increases. No details have been released on the tentative contract, and it is not clear whether it will address the issue of tuition rebates which was central in the strikers' demands. The teaching assistants earn an average pay of only $4,100 a year and were seeking a rebate on tuition fees which, at $5,100, exceed their income.

Half-term courses, which were canceled by the university, will not be revived, which will mean work reductions for some of the strikers. While the union leadership has said it is neither happy nor sad with the deal, it is prepared to recommend it to the members. The membership will vote on the two-year deal this week.

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