

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 February 2000

Protests continue after police crackdown at Mexico university

Thousands of university students from institutions across Mexico protested last week's police occupation of Mexico's National Autonomous University. They struck demanding liberty for the 230 students, professors and university workers.

The Mexican Electrical Workers union, together with other labor organizations, participated in a March and rally in Mexico City's main square El Zocalo, site of the 1968 student massacre. A thousand others, members of the union of university workers, also protested in front of the Department of Government, condemning the events of "black Sunday" and demanding the release of the political prisoners. Another thousand students from the School of Physics and Mathematics of the National Polytechnic Institute struck for 24 hours against the police occupation of UNAM.

Other schools shut down by the protests include the National Metropolitan Autonomous University, the Benito Juarez University in Oaxaca, the Antonio Narro Agricultural University and the Autonomous University of Coahuila.

Protests force Bolivian president out of Oruro

Anti-government union protests forced Bolivian President Hugo Banzer to flee from the city of Oruro on Thursday, February 10. The unions were protesting government lack of attention to the region's needs.

Banzer, who had arrived to head a civic celebration, opted to leave the city. The ongoing economic crisis has hit the Oruro Andean region very hard. Oruro, a mining city, is also an industrial and communications center between Bolivia's two capital cities, La Paz and Sucre.

A week before thousands had fought the police and army in Cochabamba, an oil processing center northeast of Oruro. In that confrontation 120 were injured and hundreds arrested.

Doctors strike in Montevideo, Uruguay

More than 10,000 doctors stopped work in this capital city of 3.2 million inhabitants last Friday, February 11 in protest against the crisis in the health sector.

The doctors union declared that the health crisis came to light with the closure of a medical co-op with 20,000 members. It indicated that other co-ops may follow suit.

The strike was not observed in other cities. The Medical Federation of the Interior had opposed the strike in hopes that the new government of Jorge Batlle will address this issue. Batlle will take office March 1.

Striking technical workers continue strike against Boeing

Technical workers for the Boeing Company continue to picket the aerospace giant as the strike by the Society of Professional Engineers in Aerospace (SPEEA) approaches the one-week mark.

SPEEA claims some 19,000 out of a bargaining unit of 20,224 engineers and technical workers continue to honor picket lines, while Boeing places the number of strikers at 17,000. The strike has drawn into its ranks several thousand workers beyond the 13,500 dues-paying members of the bargaining unit. Workers have solidified their ranks despite narrow strike votes of 51 percent by technicians and 62 percent for engineers who were dissatisfied with the lack of guaranteed wage increases, lump sums and opposed benefit takeaways.

Boeing missed its first jet airplane delivery due to the strike on February 11 when it could not complete the transfer of a 747-400 cargo carrier that lists at \$177-197 million. The company claims it will deliver the jet by February 16. Boeing's contracts with airlines allow it to avoid any financial penalties for late deliveries for one month and in some cases of lateness due to labor stoppages void penalties altogether.

Boeing has given no indication that it is interested in returning to the negotiating table. It insists that it will continue production despite the strike. Among the bargaining unit members who are most critical to production are 500 designated engineering representatives or DERs. These workers provide critical support to production workers in the assembly of jets. Boeing is scouring its management ranks for possible replacements and looking to transfer employees from its Long Beach assembly plant, which is not involved in the contract dispute. The FAA has already been contacted to approve the qualifications of strikebreakers.

The FAA has also suspended the authority delegated to Boeing to certify aircraft. This authority was vested in three engineers who are members of the bargaining unit. The move will allow FAA officials to step in and provide Boeing with direct certification.

SPEEA strikers have received support from UPS drivers. Support from railroad workers resulted in two 737 fuselages stranded on tracks owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

The single most important factor in the company's calculations for maintaining production and taking on SPEEA, however, will be the collaboration of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) who represent production workers, the largest section of Boeing's workforce. The IAM agreed to a clause in their contract which bars them from honoring SPEEA's picket lines.

Tentative agreement at Midwest Express averts pilots strike

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) accepted a last-minute tentative agreement with Midwest Express and avoided a strike by 330 pilots in the early hours of February 12. No details of the deal have been made available. But compensation, pensions and medical benefits for retirees were on the table as a 30-day cooling-off period drew to a close.

The average salary for a five-year Midwest Express pilot is

\$86,000 while his counterpart at another airline receives an average \$145,000. The company is also limiting retirees to less than 40 percent of their pre-retirement income compared to 58 percent at other airlines.

Ratification of the agreement by pilots will require several weeks. ALPA won bargaining rights for pilots at Midwest Express in 1997 and have been negotiating with management since August 1998. The airline is based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and serves 31 major cities throughout the US.

Workers vote to strike New Jersey nursing home

Healthcare workers at the New Vista Nursing Home in New Jersey voted 157-4 to strike March 1. The home's owners rejected the last proposal by the New Jersey Division of 1199/SEIU, which was to have provided owners with a \$500,000 savings. Workers were demanding benefits and higher wages along with improved resident care.

New Vista has the highest rate of health department violations of any nursing home in New Jersey. In the last four years it has been cited for 92 health deficiencies by the state. Management has not contributed to pensions for nearly a year and has threatened to take away pensions and health benefits during the present round of bargaining. New Vista has also not forwarded union dues taken through payroll deductions since April of 1999.

Newspaper Guild withholds bylines from Reuters to protest contract terms

Some 250 journalists and photographers of the Newspaper Guild of New York are withholding bylines and credits as of February 14 to protest demands by Reuters for contract concessions. Three-year-long negotiations have proved fruitless.

Reuters is seeking a contract that will allow them to shift their workforce to other operations under conditions that could result in inferior terms for employees. Reuters announced in the previous week that it will launch an expensive expansion into the Internet.

The byline strike will continue until midnight February 25.

Essential Services Council orders Montreal transit workers to end pressure tactics

Quebec's Essential Services Council has ordered 2,200 Montreal Urban Community Transit Corporation (MUCTC) maintenance workers to immediately end a work slowdown and provide the overtime needed to restore full bus and subway service. MUCTC officials have blamed the maintenance workers' job action for forcing 100 of Montreal's 1,300 buses off the road.

The Essential Services Council's order, which was issued Sunday evening, has the same force as a court injunction. Those found guilty of breaking it are liable to fines of up to \$50,000 and jail terms.

The maintenance workers and 3,700 bus and subway drivers, who are represented by a different union, are currently working without a contract. While wages are in dispute, the workers are particularly upset by the MUCTC's unilateral imposition of a three-year moratorium on its payments into the workers' pension fund.

The MUCTC has accused maintenance workers of vandalizing buses and committing other illegal acts, such as setting off fire alarms, to disrupt service. Although police have investigated these allegations, no charges have been laid.

In opposing the MUCTC's application for a cease-and-desist

order from the Essential Services Council, the maintenance workers' union blamed bus and subway drivers for contributing to the slowdown. Two weeks ago bus and subway drivers staged various job actions, but their union subsequently announced a [truce](#) with the MUCTC.

In the past the Essential Services Council has heavily penalized transit workers for defying its rulings. Last week it ordered bus drivers in the Montreal suburb of Laval to provide two days of free service to [compensate](#) commuters for a brief job action in April 1999.

Newfoundland social workers mount three-day wildcat strike

Newfoundland government social workers mounted a three-day wildcat strike last week to protest their workload and demand higher wages. The strike ended Friday, one day after a court injunction ordering an immediate end to the walkout came into force. Some 300 of the 337 social workers employed by the Newfoundland government participated in the job action.

Health and Community Services Minister Robert Grimes refused to meet with union representatives until the walkout ended. In a subsequent meeting with Grimes, Tom Hanlan, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public Employees (NAPE), proposed an occupational review of the social workers' job classification, which could lead to their being placed in a higher paid job bracket.

Fearing the wildcat could spark a broader revolt against the contracts negotiated by NAPE, Hanlan had earlier said that he opposed reopening the social workers' contract to give them a general wage increase unless all NAPE contracts were also reopened. Hanlan commented, "If the contracts are going to be opened to provide general wage increases, then we want all the contracts to be opened."

Grimes has responded to the union's request for a job classification review by saying that the provincial Liberal government will be meeting later this week to discuss the proposal, along with similar requests from other NAPE bargaining units and from 4,500 nurses who are represented by a different union. Last year the Newfoundland government forced an end to a nurses strike by passing back-to-work legislation. Like the nurses, social workers in Newfoundland are the lowest paid in their profession anywhere in Canada.



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