

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 February 2000

Nicaraguan teachers on strike

On February 25, Nicaraguan teachers in the northern city of Esteli went on strike. Teachers across the nation are poised to join them unless the government responds to their demands by February 26. They are demanding a 200 percent wage increase.

Education Minister Beteva ridiculed the teachers, saying that they do not deserve to earn as much as workers because they are "unproductive."

Enraged citizens kidnap police in Mexico

On February 19 and 20, hundreds of enraged citizens of Tepatepec in Hidalgo State, 80 kilometers north of Mexico City, took 61 state policemen hostage to demand the release of protesting students at the rural El Mexe teachers college who were arrested. The police were tied up and marched to the town square. Protesters also burned more than a dozen police cars.

The student protesters began an occupation of the school seven weeks ago to protest corruption by administrators and state officials, to demand the firing of administrative personnel and to provide more scholarships.

Early Saturday morning hundreds of state police stormed the college, which prompted hundreds of students and supporters to converge on the school. Most of the police managed to leave, but at least 65 police officers were surrounded by the crowd, stripped of their shirts and marched under force to the town square. After five hours 376 protesters were released in exchange for the police officers.

Meanwhile, in Tlaxcala State the women students of Benito Juarez teachers college extended a strike that began on February 21 in solidarity with their comrades at the El Mexe College.

Bolivian workers express solidarity with jailed UNAM students

In Bolivia's capital of La Paz workers have created a Solidarity Committee to show their support for the students who carried out a nine-month strike at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM). The Committee issued a manifesto demanding the release of 300 Mexican students still detained in jail. They also denounced the alleged rape of a 17-year-old student by Mexican police. The Committee is composed of the Press Union of La Paz, the Bolivian Workers Federation (COB), the Peasant Federation, and student and human rights organizations.

Argentine union federation agrees to government labor law changes

Argentina's main workers federation, the CGT, reached an agreement with the government of President Fernando De la Rúa on legislation to restructure labor laws. Rodolfo Daer, CGT chief, approved the agreement. The deal caused conflicts within the CGT bureaucracy with president-elect Hugo Moyano, the leader of the Peronist wing of the union, denouncing the deal and organizing a protest at the CGT headquarters in Buenos Aires. On February 24 about 18,000 trade union followers of the Moyano Peronist wing of the CGT struck and marched through the streets to oppose the labor law. The turnout was less than had been expected. Government spokespersons said that the so-called general strike was barely felt outside of Buenos Aires.

While the agreement drops the government's plans to extend the probation period for new workers it weakens the ability of unions to negotiate industry-wide pacts.

In the industrial city of Córdoba provincial government employees protested against legislation to privatize electric utilities, banks and

gaming. As the march approached the city center, police blocked demonstrators. The protesters rallied in front of the CGT building, where they denounced provincial leader Miguel Díaz, who has accepted the privatization law.

Chiapas rural workers and farmers clash with police

Two thousand rural coffee plantation workers from many organizations in the Mexican state of Chiapas, joined 3,000 small coffee producers in a march in Chiapas on February 25 against government repression. The small producers also demanded better coffee prices. Police violently repressed the march with tear gas and baton blows, which left many women and children badly injured. One policeman was killed and many protesters were wounded.

Brazil's unions demand a boost in the minimum wage

The Brazilian workers federation CUT is demanding an increase in the Brazilian minimum wage to \$100 a month from the current \$76. Currently the minimum represents 28.6 percent of the average wage. In comparison, it is about \$750 a month in the US, or 38 percent of the average. The average minimum wage for Brazil's Mercosur partners (Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina) is \$150 a month. Brazil's minimum is also lower than that for Venezuela, Mexico and Peru.

Furthermore, today's minimum wage has only 26 percent of the buying power of the 1940 minimum, even though the Gross Domestic Product per worker has risen five-fold since then. Brazil's economy is the largest in Latin America, but 15 million workers subsist on the minimum wage under conditions of slow starvation.

The situation is seen as very explosive and is causing divisions within the government. Last week the Cardoso administration announced that the government was in surplus for 1999. Taxes exceeded expenditures by more than \$17 billion, or 3.3 percent of the federal budget, a condition imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Cardoso opposes an increase in the minimum wage and demands that his critics tell him where the money is going to come from.

Talks between Boeing and professional union break off as strike continues

Contract talks between Boeing Company and the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) broke off February 26. Three days of negotiations led by the top official of the Federal Mediation and Consulting Service have failed to produce an agreement in the two-and-a-half week strike.

Boeing claims to have offered engineers a guaranteed 3 percent salary increase over the life of a new three-year contract and technical workers would receive guaranteed increases of 2 percent for each of the three years. The company is still asking for employee contributions to medical coverage.

But according to SPEEA "the Boeing Co. flat-out said it would not pay one more penny than they had offered before." The union has also been placing heavy emphasis on the need for generous bonuses such as those received by the International Association of Machinists in their contract last fall.

Meanwhile the resolve of some 18,000 engineers and technical workers to continue walking the picket lines remains strong. On February 19 and 21 strikers and their supporters turned out for rallies that included

Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers members, longshoremen and locked-out Kaiser steelworkers. The prospect of strikers receiving their last paycheck on February 24 has not dampened spirits.

Meanwhile Boeing has delivered four jets during the strike-bound month of February. In February of 1999 it delivered 47 aircraft. Further trouble developed on February 22 when Lufthansa was forced to briefly ground 26 Boeing 747-400 jets due to problems with the planes' fire-extinguishing systems. Normally Boeing Engineers would be dispatched to deal with such problems, but the strike has left the company unable to carry out the various tasks usually done by its professional workforce.

US Airways counters possible flight attendant strike with shutdown threat

US Airways warned it would shut down its flight operations if the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) does not come to an agreement before the end of a 30-day cooling-off period, which would be followed by selective strikes.

The National Mediation Board (NMB) announced on February 18 that the two sides had finally reached an impasse after three years of fruitless negotiations. On February 22 the AFA announced it would reject binding arbitration. The NMB followed with a letter initiating a 30-day cooling-off period after which the union and the company could pursue strike action or a lockout, respectively. The cooling-off period is set to expire at midnight March 25.

The union has called for a plan called CHAOS (Creating Havoc Around Our System). Instead of calling an all-out strike, the union would carry out unannounced selective strikes that would strand passengers and crews at a moment's notice while keeping the rest of its members on the payroll. The tactic has only been used once before—against Alaska Airlines in 1993.

While 99 percent of the 10,000 flight attendants have voted to support the tactic, the union leadership hopes that such a threat could pressure the airlines to come to an agreement without any job action. But the company has countered with the threat to shut down the entire airline if the AFA doesn't settle.

The announcement is certain to cause many passengers to immediately book alternatives, seemingly a bad strategy on the part of US Airways. But the company brought in a new management team from United Airlines in 1996 which was pledged to holding down labor costs and to retool the airlines. An \$18 billion contract with Airbus was signed that will replace the company's old fleets acquired through mergers with a new uniform fleet of European-built jets.

US Airways lost \$132 billion in the second half of 1999 and is slated to continue to lose money through the first quarter of 2000. It has already settled with pilots, machinists and other groups, leaving only the flight attendants. Should the airlines shut down, the company claims it will continue to pay all employees except flight attendants "for as long as is financially feasible."

The AFA says that US Airways has made \$2.1 billion over the last five years and presently has \$900 million in cash on hand. The union and company have been deadlocked over pay, work rules and benefits. Flight attendants currently make annual salaries beginning at \$17,145 and increasing to \$36,918 after 14 years. There has been no wage increase for the last four years.

Heavy police presence in South Carolina as ship is unloaded with nonunion labor

About 100 police wearing helmets and holding riot shields watched 20 dockworkers, chanting and holding signs, who picketed at a terminal in Charleston, South Carolina February 24 where a freighter owned by a Danish company was being unloaded by nonunion workers. Police watched as protesters circled in front of the entrance to the terminal where the freighter owned by Nordana Line docked at sundown.

Last month during a similar demonstration about 400 members of the

International Longshoremen's Association clashed with police. Ten people were injured and four were indicted on charges of criminal conspiracy and rioting. No arrests were reported Thursday.

Researchers report on sickness among tobacco pickers

Researchers report that more than 40 percent of tobacco farmworkers are being poisoned through the absorption of nicotine through their skin when picking green tobacco plants. The condition, called green tobacco sickness, has been long known and can cause nausea, vomiting, dizziness and weakness within hours after contact with the surface of wet tobacco leaves.

The report was compiled by researchers from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and published in the February issue of *the American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. The researchers interviewed 144 Hispanic farm workers from 35 farms in North Carolina and found 41 percent of workers reporting they had the sickness during the previous summer and 76 percent having contracted it more than once. Over half reported taking no precautions. Only 20 percent reported taking medicine or wearing long-sleeved shirts. Only 9 percent reported ever having seen a doctor, and a mere 7 percent took time off work.

"Many farmworkers believe they will be fired and lose their income if they get sick or work too slowly," said Sarah Quandt, who led the research. She called green tobacco sickness "an environmental justice issue" and charged that "poor, minority, and medically underserved populations bear a disproportionate share of environmental and occupational health risks."

Tobacco plants are planted in rows so close together that it is impossible to harvest them without making contact with the leaves. In addition, the hot summers make picking with gloves and long-sleeved shirts extremely uncomfortable. Many workers remove their shirts during harvesting in order to find relief from the heat, further increasing exposure.

The researchers believe that in addition to known symptoms, green tobacco sickness may also cause cramps, headache, breathing problems, paleness, chills, increased sweating, and changes in heart rate and blood pressure.

Federal judge halts rail workers strike

A federal judge in Omaha, Nebraska issued a temporary restraining order to halt a strike by members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way (BMWE) against Union Pacific Railroad. The union called the strike over the closure of a company facility in Laramie, Wyoming.

The facility constructs track panels, 40-foot sections of track used in the construction and repair of railroad tracks. It employs 37 union members who had their jobs terminated after Union Pacific decided to obtain track panels from outside sources and close the plant. The BMWE claims the closure was unilateral and violates its labor agreement with Union Pacific.

US District Judge Joseph Bataillon issued the restraining order just four hours after BMWE members struck locations along rail lines that comprised Union Pacific's track in Nebraska, Kansas and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and the West Coast. In addition the judge also ordered the company to reopen the Laramie facility and rehire the terminated workers. His order stipulated that the company could only use track panels from Laramie for construction on property known as the original Union Pacific territory. It is not clear the degree to which other tracks outside this area will be affected by the union's decision to accept the judge's order. Hearings will be held to review the conflict over the future of the Laramie operations.

Union Pacific has grown into one of the largest railways in the United States, operating 33,000 miles of track in 23 states in the Western two-thirds of the country. It employs 52,000 workers of which 8,000 are represented by the BMWE.

Construction trades concede no-strike pledge over stadium remodeling for Green Bay Packers

The Green Bay Packers and the northern Wisconsin area's Building and

Construction Trades Council signed a letter of agreement in which the unions pledge not to strike or picket during the remodeling of Lambeau Field.

Packers President John Jones acknowledged the role played by the construction union in backing the renovation project and related legislation required for its implementation. Other business interests wanted nonunion labor used in the project in an effort to contain costs. The pledge to forego any job actions was seen as critical to maintaining profitability.

The forced pace of construction and ignoring of safety issues by both contractors and the construction unions when working on Milwaukee's new baseball stadium led to the deaths of construction workers last year.

UAW reaches tentative agreement with auto suppliers

Negotiators for the United Auto Workers and American Axle & Manufacturing Inc. reached a tentative agreement February 25, just hours before the expiration of the old contract dating from 1997. Neither side released details of the contract that covers 7,500 workers in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck and Three Rivers, Michigan and New York state plants in Buffalo, Tonawanda and Cheektowaga. Informational meetings will be held during the week following the conclusion of talks.

Canadian truckers protest fuel price increases

Protests and work stoppages by truckers increased across the country and the US last week in opposition to rising fuel prices. While most of the actions had died down by week's end, the problems for independent truckers continue to worsen. Similar protests have taken place in Florida and Washington DC, as fuel prices climb across the continent as a result of the rise in world oil prices.

In Newfoundland, a four-day protest ended when transport carriers agreed to meet with truckers to discuss a formula to deal with increases in fuel costs. About 200 trucks had set up check points on the Trans-Canada Highway in that province, which relies heavily on trucking due to a lack of rail lines. The protest was renewed over the weekend as protests died down in the rest of the country. Finance Minister Lloyd Matthews has said the province will not give in to the truckers' demand for reduced taxes on diesel fuel.

Hundreds of truckers blocked traffic outside of petroleum plants north of Toronto during the week, and rush hour traffic was tied up by crawling convoys early in the week. Police charged some drivers with various infractions for the protest. Last Friday more than 100 trucks circled the General Motors plant in Oshawa, east of Toronto, to put pressure on the company, which has begun talks with the truckers. GM called in police to ensure a smooth afternoon shift change.

On the other side of the city about 20 trucks circled the Ford plant in Oakville. Both GM and Ford reported that no production was lost as a result of the protests. In the largest protest to date more than 1,000 Ontario truckers parked their rigs at the Metro East Trade Centre in Pickering, east of Toronto last Thursday. It was estimated that between 3,500 and 4,000 of the province's 20,000 independent truckers were off the job at the peak of the protest.

Three weeks ago 5,000 independent truckers formed a new organization, the National Truckers' Association, to represent them in negotiations with government and industry for relief from punishing fuel prices. The truckers say fuel costs as well as stagnant pay rates, which haven't risen in 20 years, have created an intolerable situation for independents. Reports have emerged that many truckers work illegally long hours to support their families, with some routinely putting in 90 hours a week, well in excess of the 60-hour maximum.

The Association met last week with Ontario Labour Minister Chris Stockwell, but the talks had few results. Ontario Premier Mike Harris has already said his government will not lower the provincial sales tax of 14.3 cents a litre, saying that taxes were not the problem. While taxes account for as much as 30 percent of fuel prices, both federal and provincial

governments have refused to discuss any reduction in fuel taxes.

While over the past year fuel costs have almost doubled, they've risen as much as 30 percent in the past eight weeks alone. Fuel costs for the average trucker have gone from \$1,000 a week to \$1,350 a week. The national average price is now 69.7 cents per litre. While diesel is generally cheaper than gasoline because it requires less refining, the price of diesel is actually higher in some parts of the country. Energy prices alone have pushed the inflation rate up by a full percentage point in the last year, accounting for over half of the overall increase.

Toronto city workers threaten strikes

Two thousand four hundred library workers are set to go on strike if a last minute deal is not reached, and another 20,000 municipal workers have been asked by their union to make strike preparations. The workers are represented by different locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in Toronto and are involved in separate negotiations.

The librarians, library assistants and maintenance workers, members of Local 416 of CUPE, passed a strike deadline on Saturday but they are still awaiting a strike order from their union. Most of the library workers at Toronto's 98 branches have not had a raise since 1992. With fewer than 100 management positions to fill in, it is likely that all city libraries will be closed in the event of a strike.

CUPE Local 79 workers include clerical workers, public health nurses, welfare workers, inspectors and social service administrators who have been without a contract for nearly two years. Most have not had a wage increase in eight years and the union is seeking to make up for some of this loss in the current negotiations. The city has offered a three-year contract with salary increases totaling 7.5 percent. If their strike goes ahead it would mean the virtual shutdown of municipal operations, which could bring the city to a standstill.

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman has issued a provocative ultimatum to the city workers, daring them to go on strike. "Shave or get out of the washroom," he said. Lastman has blamed the union for stalling negotiations over the past year, but the union says the city has taken tough positions on issues such as job security and is seeking the division of the union into four separate contracts.



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