

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 March 2000

March to protest economic crisis in Ecuador

In protest against the dollarization of the economy, teachers, students and health workers will march in Quito, Ecuador on March 15. The protest, being called the "march of the empty pots," will be a prelude to a broader mobilization planned for March 21. The protests may be followed by a national strike, according to a spokesperson for the United Workers Front (FUT), the labor federation of Ecuador. FUT and the Popular Front are organizing the protests. FUT President Wilson Alvarez declared, "[The] process of dollarization does not benefit the people. It only benefits bankers and big business."

The Law of Economic Transformation was approved last week. In addition to proposing the replacement of the sucre with the dollar at the current exchange of 25,000 to one, the proposal includes bank and labor reforms that would make Ecuador more enticing to foreign investors.

Salvadoran Social Security workers, doctors to negotiate

On March 9 Social Security health workers and doctors suspended their four-month-long strike after the government agreed to negotiate. The strikers are rejecting the privatization of health care and are demanding the rehiring of 200 fired workers. The government agreed to bargain when 3,000 doctors and 11,000 health workers declared their intention to resign en masse over these issues.

Mexican truck drivers protest

On March 10 owner operators of trucks blocked roads of Tlalnepantla, Mexico to protest against the 15 percent value added tax. The truckers say that the tax is making it impossible for them to earn a decent living. The Zedillo government had promised to negotiate their grievances last December.

Mexican student protests continue

Striking students at the Mexe Teachers College in Tepatepec, Hidalgo Province in Central Mexico warned on March 6 that unless five of their leaders were released there would be mass protests. The government immediately released one of the leaders, Luis Villareal, but the rest are still being held.

Student spokesman Sergion Garcia also indicated that the reopening of the school depended on the government fulfilling its promises from February 19, when the townspeople took police officers hostage in support of their strike. Also, the government has yet to dismiss outstanding arrest warrants against some of the townspeople.

Mexe is one of the oldest of a network of 16 residential rural teaching colleges set up in 1922 as a result of the Mexican Revolution to train peasant teachers. The government considers these colleges a burden and since 1995 has kept them impoverished. The average per capita budget is less than \$1,000 a year, with the average citizen spending only about \$1.20 a day on food, enough for rice, tortillas and beans. At times the rural women have had no bathing water or cooking fuel. Classrooms, labs and dormitories are in a state of disrepair. These were the conditions that led to the strikes at El Mexe and Amilcingo, in the State of Morelos.

Meanwhile, on March 7, about 200 students and their families occupied the dean's office at Mexico City's UNAM (the Spanish acronym for National Autonomous University of Mexico). The occupation marked a month from the day that federal police units ended the 10-month-long student strike at the university. The main demand was for the release of

more than 200 jailed students.

Government forces kill two peasant squatters in Colombia

At least two were killed and about 70 wounded in a land eviction in Monteria, Colombia, about 500 kilometers (300 miles) from the capital city of Bogota. The victims were from a group of poor peasants who had occupied a 49-acre plot of land. In retaliation the peasants set a police station on fire. The peasants had petitioned the government that it purchase the land for homes. The government refused and instead attacked the homeless on March 7.

Striking engineers defiant as Boeing imposes final contract offer

The strike by Boeing engineers and technical workers remains strong in the wake of the aerospace company's implementation of its final contract offer. Company officials admit that fewer than 100 workers crossed picket lines after one month on strike to take advantage of the offer.

The Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) claim that they continue to have bargaining unit members defecting from the company to the side of the strike. While SPEEA has only 14,300 dues paying members, it claims 19,000 out of a bargaining unit of some 22,000 are out on strike. The strong opposition to Boeing's attempt to saddle professional workers with taking on premium payments for medical care—something previously paid by the company—and the refusal to guarantee wage increases to engineers has galvanized members of the bargaining unit who previously lacked cohesiveness in the dispute with Boeing. One striker expressed the situation that has arisen during the present round of contract talks: "There was definitely a class division. We are all workers now."

It is expected that Boeing will continue to hold out through the next period in hope that more strikers will return to work due to economic pressures. But strikers have received wide popular support in Washington state, where a majority of Boeing's operations are located, and many have taken advantage of the tight labor market to find other jobs to sustain them throughout the strike.

SPEEA entered the strike without a strike fund. But a \$140,000 fund has come into existence through labor and individual support. This has been added to by nominal contributions from the AFL-CIO and some of its affiliated unions. Strikers will be able to draw upon the fund to pay for as much as a third of their rent or mortgage payments, a third of daycare expenses and up to \$40 a month for phone bills. So far SPEEA has paid out \$68,000 to 2,225 strikers for domestic bills.

The strike has significantly affected Boeing. During February the aerospace giant delivered only 15 of 42 commercial jets. Of those delivered, a majority were nearly finished when the strike broke out at the beginning of the month. The company has stated that it plans to hire temporary replacements and shift work to other locations in order to boost production, but it is doubtful it can assemble sufficient skilled labor to meet obligations to its customers. The company also announced that it may cut another 5,000 jobs before the end of the present year. With its remaining staff of engineers and management fill-ins, Boeing is focusing on safety and mechanical problems on airliners already in service, rather than building new planes.

In a related development, Boeing reached a tentative contract with the SPEEA unit representing 1,500 workers at its Wichita, Kansas operations.

In return for an agreement that would guarantee the unit the same wages and benefits as its striking counterparts, the unit has agreed to not launch a strike concurrent with the present one in Washington state and other locations.

Boeing announced in February it had made a \$662 million profit in the fourth quarter, a 42 percent increase from the period of one year ago. But now the company expects a sharp change well into the second quarter of the new fiscal year. It is estimated by outside sources that the difference between the union and company over guaranteed wages and benefits combined with a bonus comes to \$90 million spread over three years, a figure not considered unreasonable now given the potential losses to be incurred from an extended strike. But, as in the case of strikes against other major US corporations such as General Motors, Boeing is taking a hard line in order to demonstrate to its major shareholders that it will hold down labor costs.

US Airways attendants specify flight routes for selective strikes

The Association of Flight Attendants, representing 10,000 attendants at US Airways, unveiled a list of 48 routes flown by the east coast airline that the union would target for unannounced partial strikes. The announcement came two weeks before the expiration of a 30-day cooling-off period on March 25, which permits the union to legally strike under the Railway and Airline Labor Act.

So far behind-the-scenes talks have failed to resolve the impasse in negotiations. A last attempt at a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the National Mediation Board (NMB) is set for March 17. Among the routes slated for selective strikes in what the union calls CHAOS—Creating Havoc Around Our System—are 16 of the airline's most profitable daily flights from the Washington-Baltimore area to locations in Boston, Orlando and San Francisco. US Airways has already announced that if the AFA launches such tactics it will close down its entire airline system.

The AFA has been demanding a contract formula called "parity plus one," which would entail wage and benefit parity with the nation's top four airlines, plus 1 percent. The airline's other 10 unions reached agreement by such a scheme. The content of the scheme, however, would be determined by someone outside the airlines. Flight attendants at US Airways have been without a contract since 1996.

Ontario Tories renew conflict with teachers

The long-standing tension between teachers and the Ontario provincial government heightened this week with the announcement from the Ministry of Education of new regulations on how teaching time is calculated. This has been interpreted as a new provocation against the teachers and a further attack on public education in the province.

The onerous Tory funding formula imposed two years ago through Bill 160, dramatically increased the amount of time teachers had to work. Following the capitulation of their unions three years ago, teachers have sought ways around the rules, such as including "on-call" time as time worked. The new rules are intended to restrict such interpretations and force teachers to teach more classes in the school day, with less preparation time. In addition, Education Minister Janet Ecker announced that if voluntary teacher participation in extra-curricular activities did not increase, the province would introduce legislation to enforce their involvement. Many teachers have maintained a work-to-rule policy since the introduction of the new laws.

Ecker at the same time announced additional funding to school boards of \$190 million as a gesture to curry public favor. The new money is also intended to prevent deficits being posted by the growing number of school boards that are unable to meet their budget demands. A Windsor school board recently announced that it was submitting a deficit budget for the coming school year, prompting a denunciation from Ecker. "It is illegal for school boards to submit a budget that includes plans to deliberately run a deficit," she said. If a board does operate at a deficit, the province could

take over its administration directly or impose penalties. School boards and teachers are watching closely to see how this dispute develops.

In their annual meeting last week, teachers voiced their opposition to the new policy and to threats issued by the education ministry. Earl Manners, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, invited other school boards to follow the lead of what has been dubbed "the Windsor Solution" with inducements of a no-strike guarantee. The union is determined to avoid a new confrontation with the Tories that would further expose the leadership, and welcomes the actions of school boards in taking on the Tories in their stead.

In 1997 the Tories faced a wave of public protest arising from a strike by 126,000 teachers in the province over new laws aimed at the dismantling of public education. While this strike was defeated with the complicity of the union leadership, the animosity of teachers towards this government has not subsided. In the wake of these recent provocations, there is renewed pressure for the unions to take a stand against the Tories, a situation that will sharpen when new contract negotiations begin in June. Teachers in Ontario haven't had a pay raise since 1993.

Union looking to bid on Thomson newspapers

The announced sale last month of five Canadian newspapers by Thomson Corporation has prompted the consideration of a purchase by Canada's largest newspaper union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP).

Paul McKie, president of Local 191 and a reporter at the *Winnipeg Free Press*, said the union has been studying the possibility of buying the *Free Press* as well as the four other Canadian newspapers Thomson is selling. Thomson announced last month that it was putting all of its 130 North American papers up for sale, with the exception of the flagship *Globe and Mail* in Toronto. It is estimated that the five papers are worth around \$300 million. "Obviously when you are talking about money like this, it is not conceivable with just employees," McKie said. "We are working with other people in the financial community."

Such a deal would be preferred by the federal government, which has raised concerns over the growing concentration of newspaper ownership by giants such as Quebecor and Hollinger. With growing competition in the newspaper industry, an employee buyout would link the interests of the labor officials and management even more tightly, and be used to suppress struggles by workers for better conditions and wages.



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