

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 March 2000

Colombian workers protest

On Thursday, March 16, 800,000 workers launched a strike against the social and economic policies of the Andres Pastrana regime. The unions protested against wage cuts and layoffs for public sector workers. The workers, grouped in the National Unified Command, also opposed raising the age of retirement and increasing Social Security contributions.

The 24-hour strike was declared 90 percent effective by the unions. In addition to state offices, it shut down education, since the majority of teachers joined in the protest. Even though state communications workers and oil workers also joined in the stoppage, telephone service and oil production were not substantially interrupted. Public hospitals operated only emergency room service.

Colombia is in the midst of a long economic recession. In 1999 industrial production fell 16.7 percent. The unemployment rate is 20 percent.

Two-day strike at Buenos Aires' Colon Theater

On March 15 and 16, Argentina's prestigious Colon Theater canceled ballet performances of "Sleeping Beauty," as a result of a walkout by its employees. The entertainment workers demanded that 300 temporary workers become permanent employees. The De La Rúa government refused. Instead it threatened the workers with the closure of Colon Theater. This measure forced the workers back on the job March 16.

Mass protests in Costa Rica

On Friday, March 17 thousands of workers and students marched through the streets of San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, against the privatization of the state-owned telephone company. The protesters carried signs and chanted against the rise in fuel prices, government wage policies and the privatization of the retirement system, and blocked traffic.

The march took place as farmers continued to block the Pan-American Highway, cutting traffic between San Jose and other cities. Their protest is against the dropping of import tariffs on potatoes, onions and carrots, and against the government's agricultural policies.

At the same time, hundreds of taxi drivers and truck and bus owner-operators declared their support for the farmers and joined the protests.

Paraguayan peasants march on Asuncion

On March 16, some 30,000 peasants marched on the Paraguayan capital of Asuncion to demand low-cost credits to reactivate agricultural production. The peasants camped out in a square across from the Congress building and participated in a protest rally on March 17. This is the third time this year that peasants from many parts of Paraguay came to Asuncion to demand government action.

Deadline approaching for US Airways negotiations

Negotiators for US Airways and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) launched the last round of negotiations March 17, in an attempt to avoid a strike or lockout when the 30-day cooling-off

period expires March 25.

The East Coast airline has been trumpeting its "parity plus one" contract, which purports to provide US Airways flight attendants with the average salary at the four largest airlines, plus 1 percent. But US Airways is adamant about further cuts in labor costs. In exchange for wage increases, the company is demanding concessions equal to a 4.9 percent cut in other areas, such as benefits, vacations or work rules. Flight attendants refer to the offer as "pick your poison."

US Airways is pushing for reductions in the formula for sick-time accrual, especially a clause that allows five "occurrences" a year when flight attendants are not required to produce a doctor's note. The union is demanding changes in the retirement package, which not only deducts the flight attendant's Social Security but a portion of the spouse's or a dependent's Social Security.

When released from mediated talks toward the end of February, the AFA announced it would launch selective strikes if a contract was not reached before the end of the cooling-off period. They followed up by naming selected routes that would be targeted for unannounced strikes, something the union terms CHAOS—Creating Havoc Around Our Space. The company countered by saying it would shut down all operations if the flight attendants launched any job actions.

Kaiser Aluminum hit with safety fines over Louisiana plant explosion

The US Mine Safety and Health Administration has proposed the Kaiser Aluminum Corporation pay \$533,000 in fines stemming from an explosion at its strike-bound Gramercy, Louisiana plant. Twenty-nine workers, hired as strikebreakers, were injured in the July 5, 1999 explosion that rocked the area, damaging homes and cars. Kaiser was cited for 23 violations of safety regulations and further accused by the federal agency of interfering with its investigation.

The company has denied all allegations and said it will appeal the fines to the Federal Safety and Health Review Commission. Earlier this month Kaiser announced it will spend \$198 million to rebuild and upgrade the Gramercy operation. The plant refined bauxite ore to produce alumina for the company's aluminum products.

Some 3,000 United Steelworkers members at the Louisiana plant and facilities in Washington state and Ohio struck Kaiser on September 30, 1998. When the USW offered to return to work without a contract Kaiser instituted a lockout. 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.

Denver health care workers vote to continue strike

Striking nurses and health care workers for Kaiser Permanente in Denver, Colorado voted March 12 by 86 percent to reject the latest contract proposal offered by the company. The United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7 and management had been trying to come to an agreement over ratios of staff members to patients, staffing during breaks and other issues.

Both sides were trying to fashion an agreement to deal with staffing

issues. But talks broke down over a union proposal to pass any disputed issues to binding arbitration. Kaiser Permanente called the proposal unacceptable. As in other industries, hospital and health care companies have used staff reductions to wrest more profit out of operations. Over 1,000 nurses, physician assistants, technicians, pharmacists and optometrists struck Kaiser Permanente on March 2.

Teamsters strike halts New England bakery operations

Teamsters members struck Interstate Bakeries Corp. throughout New England March 15, after negotiations broke down over the company's refusal to abide by an arbitration decision stemming from an unfair labor complaint. Some 1,400 drivers, sales representatives, shippers and receivers walked off the job causing the delivery of various products such as Wonder Bread, Hostess and Drake's to be halted. The company's Biddleford, Maine bakery was shut down after 500 bakery union members refused to cross Teamsters picket lines. Another company bakery employing 400 workers was forced to shut down due to the strike.

Iron Workers union official admits embezzling funds

The executive director of organizing for the Iron Workers union pleaded guilty March 15 in US District Court in Washington to stealing more than \$50,000 in union money. Fred G. Summers confessed to using his union credit card to pay for various personal expenses for himself as well as the union's president and their friends and relatives.

There were 19 charges against Summers of embezzlement of union funds and making false entries in union financial records. The charges involve incidents occurring between 1994 and 1999 at restaurants in the DC area and during trips to Florida, Indiana, California and other locations.

Among the charges Summers piled up were expenses for meals and travel for his wedding and honeymoon. On a 1997 golf trip to Palm Springs, California Summers illegally spent \$2,300. The tab for one dinner involving Iron Workers President Jake West and several women came to \$933.

Summers could face up to two years in prison, but prosecutors have indicated they will seek a reduced sentence in return for Summers' cooperation in investigation into affairs of union and police corruption. Among the possible targets is former Washington DC police chief Larry D. Soulsby who was a longtime friend of West and was present during the Palm Springs junket. Prosecutors claim they will seek to find out whether there were union funds given or spent on Soulsby and whether any favors were bestowed in return.

Summers has agreed to pay \$50,000 in restitution to the Iron Workers union. He continued briefly at his position after his arrest in October of last year. But he has recently resigned and plans to start work in the construction business in Indiana.

Tentative agreement between Newspaper Guild and Reuters

Reuters news service and the Newspaper Guild of New York reached a tentative agreement March 16 after two and a half years of negotiations. No details were available of the pact covering 600 reporters and technicians.

The talks deadlocked for some time over Reuters' demand for increased authority to slash jobs and the right to transfer job assignments. Tensions further welled up when Reuters announced an expensive plan to expand its presence on the Internet. Guild members believed that Reuters would use the reassignment of workers in its move to the Internet as an excuse to cut wages and benefits.

Guild members authorized a strike against Reuters as well as launching a 12-day "byline strike" (withholding writers' names from

their stories) in February, followed by banner picketing at selected company locations.

Quebec medical technicians continue job action

Five thousand medical technicians across the province voted to continue their month-old job action last week. The technicians have limited their action to stopping work for 42 minutes each day because of legal restrictions imposed by the government's Essential Services council.

The action, which began February 22, is being taken by the Association des Professionnelle des Technologistes Medicaux du Quebec to achieve parity with nurse technicians, which would amount to a 4 percent salary increase. Members of the union include lab technicians, microbiologists and cytologists, technicians who identify cancer cells.

Despite the limited nature of the strike, the union has declared that it is nevertheless having an impact, citing over 100,000 tests that have been delayed. At the same time they have called upon Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard to settle the strike in their favor, asking their members to send letters his office. Francine Genest, head of the union, said March 12, "We're asking him to intervene before the effects are felt too heavily."

Toronto students occupy university office against sweatshop policy

Around a dozen University of Toronto students took over the office of university President Robert Prichard March 15 to protest the school's use of forced labor and sub-minimum wages for workers used in the manufacture of university merchandise, particularly garments bearing the school insignia. Similar protests have been carried out at US universities.

Students began the occupation after talks with the university, which have been going on for more than a year, broke off. "We're hoping they [university administrators] will realize the importance of all of our demands and come back to discussing them with us," said Sonia Singh, a 21-year-old political science student.

The students' occupation has been broadcast live on the Internet since it began. They said they plan to occupy Prichard's office until their demands are met. A rally in support of the students, members of the group Students Against Sweatshops, was held March 16 following the occupation.

British Columbia union opposes use of school volunteers

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is fighting against the use of volunteer parents in their current contract negotiations in the Surrey school district of British Columbia. The district is the largest in the province and currently uses thousands of volunteers to monitor student safety in a 10-year-old program named "Callback". The union, which is set to strike this week, has said that staff should now be hired to replace the parents. CUPE has 475,000 members across Canada and wants to apply the no-parent rule across the province.



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