

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 April 2000

One dead, scores wounded as police attack Paraguay labor protest

A police attack on a march of striking workers and farmers last week left one worker dead and many wounded in the district of San Pedro, in northern Paraguay. The demonstrators had barricaded streets to press their demands against the government. The protest was part of a "March on Asuncion" against privatization and other free market policies of the President Luis Gonzalez Macchi. Asuncion is the capital of Paraguay. This was the third strike against Macchi in a month.

As the rally ended the police attacked those who were slow to disperse. They dismantled the barricades and shot at the protesters.

Macchi became president a year ago in the wake of the resignation of Raul Cubas, who was forced to resign following a week of protests after the assassination of Vice President Luis Maria Argana.

Ecuadorian workers demand wage increases

The Ecuadorian United Workers Front (FUT) is threatening to strike for a US\$200 monthly minimum wage. FUT leader Wilson Alvarez declared that if that demand were not addressed, workers would take to the streets in protest.

On March 29 the government of President Gustavo Noboa approved a US\$20 increase that would bring the minimum up to US\$70 a month. Ecuador's current minimum wage is one of the lowest in Latin America.

Ecuador is in the midst of an economic depression. The government adopted a "dollarization" plan in March that will result in the replacement of sucres with dollars. Already US\$100 million have been exchanged for sucres. Officially only 17 percent of the workforce is unemployed, but more than 60 percent of the country's 12.4 million inhabitants are living in poverty.

As part of an attempted compromise with FUT, Noboa proposed another raise when fuel prices are decontrolled in July. Meanwhile the Ecuadorian Congress is set to give itself a raise, with salaries reaching US\$2,000 a month.

Venezuelan teachers strike

One hundred and sixty thousand teachers carried out a 48-hour national strike on March 29 to fight for better pay and working conditions. The Education Ministry declared the strike illegal. The stoppage affected 15,000 public schools.

The teachers are demanding a 400 percent raise that would bring their salaries up to the cost of the basic family market basket for Venezuela, estimated at US\$925 a month.

Currently an elementary school teacher earns US\$180 a month, with high school teachers earning US\$480 a month. The Chavez government admits that public education in Venezuela is among the worse in the world, at the level of the poorest countries in Africa.

Textile workers threatened with rioting charges

The Committee for Labor Rights (CLR) reported that 68 workers and two labor organizers in the Mil Colores garment factory located in Managua, Nicaragua are being threatened with false rioting charges. The charges stem from a work stoppage on January 27 when workers protested union-busting by the plant's new owners and the firing of 100 union members. The American owner, Craig Miller, said the firings were justified and authorized by the Labor Ministry.

According to CLR: "The workers say that they are victims of political

persecution and are demanding the withdrawal of the charges against them, reinstatement of the fired workers, freedom of association and respect for all labor rights. The United States Embassy in Managua, which provides considerable support to US investors wanting to build factories in Nicaragua, has been unwilling to use its influence with Mr. Miller to insist that he respect labor rights."

Nicaraguan textile leader Pedro Ortega, general secretary of the Federation of Textile, Garment, Leather and Shoe Workers, has been placed on the State Department's terrorist list by the US Embassy in Nicaragua. Ortega had been invited to speak at New York University in April and at the National Meeting of the Nicaraguan Network in Denver, Colorado. The terrorist designation bars him from entering the United States.

The CLR considers the designation a slander and cites it as evidence of the US Embassy's complicity with management union-busting efforts.

Most UNAM strike committee members out on bail

On March 31, 11 members of the General Strike Committee (CGH) that led the 10-month occupation of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) were released on bail. They had spent almost two months in jail after the police assault on the University on February 6. Thirteen leading CGH students—ten men and three women—are still in jail.

The CGH is currently debating the future course of struggles and is campaigning for the release of the rest of the students and for the dropping of all charges. They also insist that no negotiations will take place until every student is released. University President Juan Ramon de la Fuente has called for a dialog to begin on April 3, but it is doubtful that the CGH will attend.

Protests continue in Costa Rica against draft privatization law

Protests continue against the proposed privatization of telephones and electricity in Costa Rica. The country has undergone two weeks of protests by workers and students, the largest since the wave of protests against ALCOA in the 1970s. As of March 29 two students were on the ninth day of a hunger strike in a tent in front of the Costa Rican electric utility building. It is expected that the draft law will be voted on by the legislature at the end of April.

Brazilian peasants take agrarian official hostage

On March 30, 450 landless peasants invaded the offices of the agrarian reform agency in northern Brazil, taking the agent in charge hostage. The protesters are demanding deeds to the lands that they have been occupying. "We have spent two years talking to him about what peasants need. All we have gotten in return have been lies," said Ailson Silva, a leader of the Movement of the Landless (MST) in the state of Para. "This government's agrarian policy only understands confrontation," declared Silva.

According to Silva peasants have faced constant attacks by police and private militias hired by Para landlords. In 1996, 19 peasants were killed in the town of Eldorado de Carajas, in Para, when police attacked and removed them from occupied land.

The peasants need the legal title to their land to be able to obtain credits and to build homes. Silva declared the hostage would be released if there is progress in the negotiations to obtain titles.

Political dispute in Brazil over minimum wage increase

Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso is confronting opposition to his plan for a small increase in the minimum wage. Both the leftist Workers Party (PT) and the right-wing Liberal Front (PFL) have presented proposals that would raise the Brazilian minimum wage to 180 reales (US\$103) a month. Currently it is equivalent to US\$77.

Cardoso has rejected the proposal and instead insists that the minimum be set at 151 reales (US\$86). The cost of the higher wage would exceed the fiscal goals agreed to with the International Monetary Fund in 1998, in exchange for a financial package of US\$41.5 billion.

Initially Antonio Carlos Magalhaes, president of the Senate and member of the PFL, agreed to back Cardoso. He has since changed his mind. He now proposes that the minimum wage be set at 180 reales and that there be a system of automatic adjustments which would raise the minimum to 565 reales in 2006. According to Magalhaes, this would give Brazilian workers the buying power they had in 1945.

Los Angeles janitors take strike vote

Janitors were voting on Monday, April 3 to authorize strike action at commercial properties in downtown Los Angeles, Century City and elsewhere in LA County. The contract for the 8,500 janitors, represented by Service Employees International Union Local 1877, expired April 1. The workers, including many immigrants living below the poverty level, make an average hourly wage of \$6.90 and are seeking pay raises and other improvements.

Negotiations with 18 cleaning contractors broke down when union leaders asked for \$1-an-hour raises for the next three years. Contractors offered a one-year wage freeze for a majority of janitors followed by 40-cent per hour increases over the next two years.

Dick Davis, the bargaining coordinator for the contractors, said they initially offered a five-year wage freeze and made significant concessions from there. The union, he said, was not similarly flexible. "To me, they just haven't engaged in fair bargaining," he said. Davis said the contractors have hired temporary workers and taken other measures to ensure most office buildings will see virtually no change in their janitorial services.

The SEIU said the strike vote by LA janitors will be followed by all-night picketing, marches and chants, and civil disobedience. Contracts covering some 100,000 janitors nationwide will expire in the coming months, including in New York, Chicago, the Silicon Valley and Philadelphia.

Nurses strike Massachusetts hospital against mandatory overtime

Some 535 nurses struck St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts on April 1 over hospital demands for mandatory overtime. The walkout interrupted plans to move the hospital's patients to a new multimillion-dollar facility.

Tenet Healthcare System, which owns the hospital, and the Massachusetts Nursing Association reached agreement on 3.5 percent annual raises, but could not come to a settlement on the overtime issue, which caused talks to collapse.

Nurses are picketing with signs reading "Nursing Nightmare" and "Patients, Not Profits." One nurse told the Associated Press, "This is not an easy thing for any of us to do. We don't want to abandon our patients, but we have to." The union has charged that the mandatory overtime clause will overly tax nurses and endanger patient safety. The hospital has responded to the strike by bringing in replacement nurses.

Tenet is the nation's second-largest health care chain with 100 hospitals under its management. The California-based company realized a 23 percent profit increase in the quarter that ended February 29.

Northwest Airlines flight attendants rally in Minnesota against victimizations

Northwest Airlines flight attendants rallied March 30 at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in support of an area flight attendant who, along with some one dozen of her coworkers, was fired for an alleged sick-out over New Year's.

Diane Laporte Klingeman, a 22-year veteran at Northwest with a perfect work record, says she has been victimized by Northwest. Klingeman had already met her flying requirements for the month of December when the company asked her to fly over New Year's. She orally rejected the work request because she was sick with sinus trouble. Northwest went ahead and scheduled her for work, something she was unaware of, and then fired her for missing her shift.

Klingeman produced a note from her doctor that confirmed she had been to an emergency room as a result of sinus pain. She also turned over a medical prescription to company investigators, who proceeded to empty the bottle in order to count the number of pills she had taken.

Northwest fired her based on so-called inconsistencies in her testimony over the New Year's incident, something she attributes to incomplete memory resulting from her sickness. She told the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune*, "I don't remember much other than just trying to get better.... I was just trying to get through the weekend."

Northwest Airlines CEO grabs bonus

Northwest Airlines executives who fought tooth and nail against sufficient pay increases for employees are continuing to rake in lucrative pay and bonus packages for themselves. According to a proxy filing with the Security and Exchange Commission publicized last week, Northwest Airlines CEO John Dasburg received a \$1.05 million bonus in 1999 and an additional \$2.7 million for what are called "phantom stock units." The latter is a bonus tied to improvements in the company's stock price. In 1998 Dasburg exercised stock options worth \$16.7 million.

In the early 1990s unions at Northwest granted concessions to save the company from bankruptcy, but management has been reluctant to make up for those give-backs, despite years of increasing profitability. Dasburg's hard-line approach led to a pilot's strike in 1998. His offer to machinists caused a rebellion by the rank and file that led workers to dump the International Association of Machinists for a new union.

Most recently, he has tangled with flight attendants in a contract being negotiated by the Teamsters union. He is presently pushing a lawsuit against the Teamsters and certain members for an alleged sick-out over New Year's that led to the victimization of union members and confiscation of computers used by flight attendants for web sites that advocated contract advancements. Flight attendants went through most of the 1990's without a raise and have been without a contract since 1996. Northwest made \$300 million in 1999.

Boeing and Teamsters settle contract covering company drivers

Boeing and Teamsters officials reached a tentative agreement one day before a contract covering 300 drivers at the aerospace company expired. A few days earlier union members overwhelmingly rejected a contract that had inferior pay scales and required workers to pay health insurance premiums, a provision that Boeing tried and failed to force upon both the machinists and professional workers unions.

The final agreement offered a 3 percent across-the-board pay increase with drivers reaching top scale in six years instead of the previous eight years. The pact also included a \$2,500 bonus and a provision in which the company will continue to pay all medical premiums.

Boeing clearly wanted to obtain a foothold in the negotiations concerning the requirement for worker contributions to medical coverage. But during the recent strike by 20,000 members of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), Teamsters union members both inside and outside of the company were among the most prominent supporters of the technical workers, who also faced down the demand for payment of premiums. The newfound solidarity between the sections of Boeing employees encouraged drivers to oppose company demands. "We cannot ignore the fact that the [Teamsters] contract was being negotiated in this environment," said Boeing spokesperson Peter Conte.

Boeing, however, is determined to press for other cost-cutting measures,

namely through downsizing. Since 1996 the Teamsters local at Boeing has lost 25 percent of its membership as the company has brought in contract drivers to deliver parts and equipment along with driving buses, taxis and shuttles.

The Teamsters claim that the new tentative agreement solves this problem. But it appears that the union has agreed to become an enforcer of the company's requirements for increased workloads that will fall on drivers. Under what is called the "right of first refusal," the union agrees that if it cannot do a job competitively, Boeing will be able to hire nonunion drivers.

Boeing settles contract with technical workers at Kansas unit

Boeing reached a tentative three-year contract with the 1,350-member Wichita, Kansas unit of the Society of Professional Engineering in Aerospace (SPEEA) March 29. The agreement is to provide the same contract provisions as those won by the larger 20,000-member unit that struck Boeing during the month of February.

The Wichita unit, which has traditionally negotiated separately from its larger sister unit in Seattle, rejected earlier proposals from the company before finally agreeing to refrain from striking in exchange for a "me too" agreement that promised the same economic package as the one that would result from Seattle's negotiations.

The contract contained a minimum 9 percent pay increase over three years along with additional merit-pay increases at management's discretion that could total 17 percent. The deal also included fully-paid medical insurance and a one-time \$2,500 bonus tied to production quotas.

SPEEA has plans to expand its present membership of 1,350 to bring in an additional 4,000 members at the Wichita unit, including technical workers along with office staff.

Tentative local agreement at Ford plant in Kansas City

Ford Motor Company and the United Auto Workers reached a local agreement covering workers at the company's Kansas City Assembly truck plant March 30 after union members voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike a few days earlier.

The UAW did not release details of the agreement that was put to a vote by the 5,200-member unit April 2. The local issues in contention involved health and safety provisions affecting production at the facility that produces the F-Series full-size pickups and will soon add the new Escape sport utility vehicle.

Ford and the UAW settled a national contract last October. It is believed that two other Ford plants still have unsettled local agreements, including a stamping plant in Walton Hills, Ohio.

City workers strike in Toronto

On March 30, over 20,000 inside workers set up picket lines in Toronto in one of the largest municipal strikes in Canadian history. The action, which is expected to cripple city operations, includes building inspectors, bylaw enforcement officers, clerks, custodial staff, daycare workers, public health nurses, sewage and water-treatment staff.

Leaders of Local 79 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) had extended the strike deadline from midnight March 29, but after 45 hours of fruitless negotiations were compelled to call their members out. This is the first contract for city workers since the amalgamation of six municipalities in 1998 and the union is seeking to standardize disparate wage levels across the city.

In addition to the complex wage issues, local President Anne Dubas said there are outstanding issues of job equity and employment security. According to CUPE national President Judy Darcy, "Workers in this city are being forced to pay the bulk of the costs of the amalgamation and the creation of a new megacity by having workers work side by side and having vastly different rates of pay." The city is offering a wage hike of 7.5 percent over three years including signing bonuses, which it says is the same as what they gave outside workers.

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman took a hand in negotiations in an effort to

avert a strike but was not willing to offer any additional money. He has since denounced the workers, saying they are holding the city hostage and claims that the union's proposal would cost the city an additional \$100 million. Lastman has issued a public warning that the strike could last more than a month.

The union has decided not to picket the over 800 locations where workers are employed, choosing instead to restrict picketing to prominent centers like City Hall and operations which run 24 hours such as sewage treatment plants. Talks were resumed on Monday, April 3 under the direction of a provincially appointed mediator, but little hope has been raised of a quick resolution. The last time workers struck Toronto was in 1980 and that lasted only eight hours before the leadership called it off.

British Columbia NDP outlaw school strike

The British Columbia government, under the recently elected New Democratic Party (NDP) Premier Ujjal Dosanjh, has passed a law to force about 20,000 secretaries, janitors and other public school support staff to return to work. In a rare sitting on Sunday, April 2, the BC legislature unanimously passed Bill 7 to bring an end to the strike.

Since the strike began March 27, teachers have refused to cross picket lines, causing a province-wide shutdown of public schools in the last week. The strikers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are fighting for improved wages and job security. The rapid resort to back-to-work legislation is a further demonstration that the union-backed NDP and the new premier will defend the interests of big business against the working class. After the passage of the law, Premier Dosanjh stated, "Obviously, to date, collective bargaining hasn't worked in this area. We gave them an additional week, and now it's time to get back to school."

The opposition Liberals hypocritically condemned the cost of the extraordinary session but unanimously supported the bill. The government action is seen as an accommodation to the Liberals, who have been calling on the government to declare education an essential service to prevent future school strikes. Officials from CUPE, along with other BC unions, condemned the NDP's "betrayal," while at the same time announcing that they would abide by the strikebreaking legislation. Union officials also expressed concern that their membership might not follow their lead.



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