

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 April 2000

Protests force Costa Rican president to temporarily halt privatization plan

Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez declared last week that he will withdraw the draft privatization law for telecommunications and electricity. His proposal provoked the largest protest movement in Costa Rica in the last two decades. Last week more than 10,000 workers, students and peasants mobilized and paralyzed the government.

In an attempt to diffuse the opposition, Rodriguez is now proposing the creation of a commission to study various options, including opposition proposals on the electric and telecommunications utilities. The unions have agreed to postpone further protests for five months. They also agreed to come up with their own plan by then.

Students demonstrate in Brazil

Ten thousand students protested against President Fernando Cardoso's educational policies last week. They paraded in the streets of Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third largest city, calling for Cardoso's resignation and for the expulsion of the International Monetary Fund from Brazil. The students are demanding emergency funds for federal universities. Mass protests contributed to the fall of the previous government of President Fernando Collor.

Ecuadorian peasants fight closure of rural health clinics

Some 3,500 rural organizations in Ecuador announced a national emergency on April 4 and called for protests against the government closure of 570 local clinics. The organizations say the closures will imperil health delivery throughout rural areas.

Protest leaders point out that the government intends to have two parallel social security systems, one for the rich and another for the poor. Both will be privatized, with no provisions for the poor once the system runs out of funds.

Peasants that contribute to Social Security are demanding that the government keep clinics and hospitals open. Social Security hospitals are slated to be closed, as the government has cut most of their budgets. To be treated patients must bring in their own medicines and needed supplies.

Machinists strike Lockheed Martin

International Association of Machinists Local 776 went out on strike early Monday morning, April 10, in Fort Worth, Texas against defense contractor Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company, after their contract expired midnight Sunday. The 2,300 workers are striking for better wages and against cuts in health care benefits.

The Texas plant makes the F-16 fighter-jet, part of the fuselage for the F-22 fighter-jet, and parts for the F-2 Japanese fighter-jet.

The plant has a total workforce of 10,500. As a result of US

Defense Department downsizing, the machinists union represents some of the most senior employees in the plant, with an average age of 49 years and 20 years seniority.

Los Angeles janitors strike continues

Striking janitors in Los Angeles, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877, are continuing their strike. The 8,500 unionized janitors in Los Angeles County struck on April 7, joining a walkout by maintenance workers that began April 3.

Negotiations broke down after the janitorial contractors demanded a wage freeze for workers who earn \$6.80 to \$7.90 per hour. The latest report places the contractors proposal at \$.80 to \$1.30 over three years. The janitors are fighting for pay increases and improved benefits from an association of 18 large contracting firms that service the LA offices of some of America's top businesses.

The striking workers have won support from other unions. Operating Engineers Local 501, which represents workers who maintain air conditioners and heating equipment, voted to officially back the strike. Teamsters union members, including United Parcel Service workers and union members of trash collection and soda delivery companies, have also refused to service buildings where there are pickets. However the contractors have been able to replace a number of the workers and keep the buildings functioning.

SEIU contracts covering janitors and other building workers are expiring in a number of cities over the next few months. On Monday, April 10, 125 janitors in Chicago were set to begin a hunger strike to protest the lack of benefits for suburban janitors, whose contract expires this coming weekend. The contracts for New York City doormen, elevator operators and building superintendents expires April 20, and a march is planned for Wednesday, April 12. Building workers' contracts expired March 31 in San Diego, California and Portland, Oregon. Between April 15 and October 31 contracts are due to expire in Chicago; Buffalo, New York; Oakland and San Jose, California; Cleveland; Seattle; Milwaukee; Hartford, Connecticut; Detroit; Philadelphia; and Denver, Colorado.

Teamsters president appoints personal rep to spy on flight attendants union

Teamsters International President James Hoffa appointed a personal representative to oversee Local 2000 in a move aimed at containing persistent opposition by flight attendants at Northwest Airlines against the union bureaucracy.

Hoffa emphasized that the appointment of Brad Slawson, from Teamsters Local 120 in St. Paul in close proximity to the Twin Cities-based Local 2000, was not to be interpreted as placing the

flight attendants union in trusteeship. Regardless of what Hoffa says, the move signals that the Teamsters bureaucracy fears the determination of flight attendants to secure a decent contract while at the same time being committed to betraying this movement on behalf of Northwest Airlines. Slawson's particular function will be to attend executive board and other official meetings of the local, review internal correspondence and pass this information on to Hoffa.

Teamsters Local 2000 President Billie Davenport welcomed the appointment, saying, "Personally, I am very pleased that President Hoffa made the decision." But flight attendants, through their Internet forum, were overwhelmingly negative in their appraisal, some charging it as a first step towards trusteeship and imposition of a new contract.

Slawson's appointment comes as a new round of bargaining opens this week in San Francisco under the National Mediation Board that will focus on pay and pension issues. It also follows a decision by the Local 2000 executive board to suspend bargaining unit member Andy Damis for communicating news of negotiations to the rank and file. Damis, who helps run a web site that supports an improved contract for Local 2000 members, was elevated to the bargaining committee last fall in the wake of the 69 percent defeat of the tentative agreement endorsed by Davenport and Hoffa. According to rumors, the executive board took a vote on whether to permanently suspend Damis from the negotiating committee, but no official announcement has been made.

Tensions between flight attendants and Northwest Airlines were further increased last week after CEO John Dasburg's arrogant interview with the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, in which he stated, "Our turnover [at Northwest] is extremely low. We have the interesting phenomena of people who say they're unhappy but who must love their job, or they'd leave it, right? If you don't like what you're doing, you just quit, right?"

Dasburg has been unsparing in his persecution of flight attendants, having denied them a contract since 1996. More recently he victimized around a dozen flight attendants for an alleged New Year's sick-out. With the tacit support of the union, Dasburg has also used the courts to crack down on web sites run by flight attendants which have sought to mobilize support for a decent contract. Two weeks ago it was announced that Dasburg's total compensation for 1999 was \$3.65 million, including a \$1.05 million bonus. In 1998 he collected \$16.7 million through the exercising of stock options. When asked about the furor among Northwest workers over his compensation, Dasburg merely responded, "Propaganda."

Seattle dockworkers refuse to unload PCB-contaminated equipment

Dockworkers in Seattle, organized in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), refused April 6 to unload PCB-contaminated equipment off a ship from US Army bases in Japan. Fourteen containers with 110 tons of transformers and other electrical equipment, oil, circuit breakers, packing material, rags and other debris arrived aboard the *Wan He* to be stored temporarily in Washington state, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are used in heavy electrical

and other industrial applications, and were banned by the US government in 1977 after being linked to cancer in laboratory animals. Protesters from the environmental group Greenpeace protested as the ship arrived at the dock.

The contaminated cargo remains on board the ship pending the outcome of arbitration of the dispute with the ILWU.

Farmers and workers disrupt New Brunswick legislature

The business of the New Brunswick legislature was halted for two hours Friday, April 7 by 200 protesting government workers and farmers. Seated in the legislature galleries, the protesters started shouting and singing *Solidarity Forever*, when the 10-month-old Tory provincial government moved to end debate on its first budget.

To make good on an election promise to reduce taxes by 10 percent, the Tories are imposing more than \$100 million in spending cuts and eliminating 1,000 government jobs, largely through privatization. Farmers have been protesting the government's decision to downsize the provincial Agriculture Department, through the privatization and outright abolition of services, and merge it with Fisheries in a single ministry of Food Production. Farmers claim the cuts, which include the elimination of the 139 veterinarian and agricultural specialist jobs, will make it impossible for them to compete with farmers in neighboring Quebec.

Farm leaders, who met with Premier Bernard Lord later Friday, disassociated themselves from the legislature protest. They claimed it had been confined to the government workers who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. CUPE spokesman Robert Crockett said the protest marked the end of New Brunswickers' "honeymoon" with the Lord government: "The people of New Brunswick are finally realizing what's going on with respect to this government and its budget.... The budget is really one of cutting and slashing."

A political unknown, the 34-year-old Lord won a surprise election victory last June by appealing to widespread discontent with the spending cuts imposed by the previous Liberal government of Frank McKenna. McKenna, who retired from politics shortly before last year's election, led an unabashedly pro-business government. By mounting a wholesale attack on social programs, education and other public services, McKenna was able to make New Brunswick—one of Canada's poorest provinces—among the first to record a budgetary surplus.



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