

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 April 2000

Resistance continues to Bolivia's state of siege

The Bolivian army and police are using gases designed for war against civilians, according to the Cochabamba Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (APDHC). The gases are "second generation" CN and CS type tear gas. CS is considered to be 20 times more powerful than CN; both have the potential to burn people, make them blind, and are at times fatal.

The imposition of a state of siege against Bolivia's working class and peasantry stems from a 300 percent increase in water rates to the Cochabamba area. The Banzer government has resorted to indiscriminate acts of repression, which include the use of tear gas, beatings of protesters and indiscriminate arrests. Human rights activists report that the army has been savagely attacking peasant roadblocks.

The list of casualties from the gas, rubber and metal bullets and beatings by the police and army includes the deaths of at least six people, including Victor Hugo Daza, a 17-year-old. Another youth, Richard Ledezman, 19, is presently in a coma from a rubber bullet to the head. There are over 50 wounded. Scores of protesters have been arrested, including leaders of the water protests and union leaders from Cochabamba and La Paz. They have been imprisoned in a remote region in western Bolivia.

On Wednesday, the Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) launched a general strike against the state of siege. The COB is also demanding freedom for the arrested leaders.

Rural strike ends in Ecuador

On April 12 the Coalition of Subscribers to Rural Social Security lifted a strike that began on April 10 against the privatization of Social Security. This followed negotiations with the Alvaro Noboa government. Protests had blocked highways in 19 out of the 22 regions of Ecuador.

According to an agreement, the government will produce new draft legislation that is more acceptable to rural subscribers. The coalition announced that if the government does not address their issues, they would mount nationwide protests.

Nicaraguan teachers strike for higher wages

Last Monday, April 10, teachers' associations from across Nicaragua began a strike for wages. They are in defiance of President Arnoldo Aleman's order: "A striking teacher is a fired teacher."

Aleman has decreed that any teacher who joins the work stoppage be dismissed. He took this measure after the teachers rejected a \$10 monthly raise, less than 20 percent of what they are demanding.

Undocumented workers die crossing Guatemala-Mexico border

Eight undocumented Central Americans died from suffocation and forty-six others were hospitalized after being rescued from two sealed freight train cars in which they were traveling. Mexican authorities intercepted the train as it was heading north. When the cars were opened, more than two hundred immigrants were found inside, and two had already died.

Hunger strike ends in El Salvador, protests continue

Twelve ex-members of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute ended their hunger strike April 13, after 11 days, as the physical condition of the strikers deteriorated. The strike was called to reverse the dismissal of 221 Social Security workers. In a related action, Social Security workers blocked access for government authorities to three of the institute's hospitals.

Two hundred twenty-one workers were dismissed last November in an

attempt by the government to stop a four-month strike against the privatization of the Social Security Institute.

Mexican police occupy National University

Fearing that students would revive their strike and occupation of UNAM, Latin America's largest university, during this week's spring recess, Mexican police occupied the university in a show of force. About 4,000 federal police officers took over the campus on Saturday.

UNAM workers immediately denounced the police measure as a violation of their collective bargaining contract. UNAM workers leaders declared that the workers were prepared to strike May 3 against this violation. Student strike leaders vowed to construct a human chain around the police line on Monday, April 17.

"Marchers for housing" reach Uruguayan capital

Last Tuesday, April 11, a caravan demanding housing for all Uruguayans reached Montevideo, Uruguay's capital. The marchers spent a week on the road demanding housing for the poor. The Uruguayan Federation of Housing Cooperatives organized the mobilization; construction unions supported it. The federation's goal is for 10,000 new homes to be built in the next five years.

The protest coincides with cuts in government investment in housing, retroactive to those funds already approved by the previous government. One report shows a deficit of 200,000 homes in Uruguay.

No agreement reached at Lockheed Martin

Some 2,500 Lockheed Martin workers remain on strike in Fort Worth, Texas after negotiations between management and union, presided over by federal mediators, produced no results. Lockheed Martin and International Association of Machinists representatives met April 15 for 10 hours. According to the business agent of IAM Local 776 no further talks are planned.

In a letter to the Fort Worth plant's 10,500 employees last week company executives set a deadline of midnight Sunday for approval of its contract offer. The massive defense contractor is proposing a 10 percent increase over three years. Workers are demanding job security guarantees, cost-of-living adjustments and equal pay with plants doing the same work.

The walkout has disrupted production of the F-16 fighter jet, the fuselage for the F-2 fighter and parts for a Japanese fighter.

Northwest Airlines contract talks break off

Contract talks between Northwest Airlines and its flight attendants broke off at the end of last week with no agreement. According to Teamsters Local 2000, which represents the airline's 11,000 flight attendants, the two sides probed a union proposal on pension issues and the National Mediation Board allowed the company to evaluate the proposal. New talks have yet to be scheduled.

Meanwhile US District Judge Donovan Frank has set hearings for June 16 and 29 to consider a request by Northwest's flight attendants to dismiss a lawsuit the company filed in retaliation for an alleged New Year's sick-out. The lawsuit was held up pending results from the negotiations over a contract that expired four years ago.

Judge Frank authorized Northwest to gather information in support of its claims that the union organized an illegal job action. With the tacit approval of the union, management also targeted dissident attendants who sponsored web sites devoted to winning a decent contract. These workers

had their computers confiscated and searched for evidence related to the alleged sick-out. One dozen flight attendants have been terminated as a result of the investigation. The suit has been used both to intimidate Northwest flight attendants and ensure the further collaboration of the Teamsters bureaucracy by holding over its head the threat of financial penalties similar to the \$45.5 million fine levied against the American Airlines pilots union.

United Airlines, pilots mediate dispute

United Airlines and the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) took their contract negotiations to the National Mediation Board last week after an employee stock-option plan expired April 11. The plan stems from a 1994 agreement whereby pilots accepted a pay cut in return for receiving stock in the airline. With the passing of the deadline pilots will no longer be receiving stock, although the old contract remains in effect until a new agreement is negotiated.

United's pilots trail behind many of their counterparts at other airlines. A United junior captain with 10 years seniority makes \$10,677 a month in comparison to the \$12,715 comparable monthly income of a pilot at Delta Air Lines.

Pilots, machinists and a section of white-collar employees own a combined 55 percent of United Airlines through such stock options. The contract with machinists expired in July of last year.

Nurses' strikes in Massachusetts and New York continue

A strike by nurses at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts is now in its third week. Most of the hospital's 535 nurses walked out March 31 in a dispute over staffing. The nurses assert that Tenet Healthcare System, which owns St. Vincent's and about 120 other hospitals, imposes mandatory overtime in an effort to avoid hiring more nurses.

Four hundred nurses at Nyack Hospital in Nyack, New York, north of New York City, have been on strike for 16 weeks. The workers there too walked out over staffing levels, as well as wages.

Workers at Disneyland reject contract

Disneyland maintenance workers have rejected a proposed contract by a vote of 520 to 74. The workers' current contract is due to run out in 2003. The proposal would have extended this by two years, giving workers a 3 percent pay increase in each of its final two years. It would also have added a week's vacation for employees with more than 20 years of service and extended union representation to Disney's new California Adventure theme park.

Workers threw the proposal back because of concessions demanded by the company. The proposed contract stipulated that Disneyland would no longer pay to launder employees' uniforms and refused to provide lockers.

Had the contract gone through, management would have gained greater flexibility in moving workers to other tasks and more discretion in possible layoffs. Management would also have had the unrestricted right to subcontract out work at the new California Adventure, which opens next year.

Miller Brewing Company office staff vote to strike

Office workers at Miller Brewing Company's headquarters voted last Thursday to strike for the first time in 20 years. One hundred fifty of the two hundred employees voted in favor of the action, which is to be scheduled by bargaining negotiators. The workers include accounting clerks, payroll specialists and schedulers.

The Office & Professional Employees International Union has been in talks with management since February when a three-year contract expired. The latest contract extension is due to expire April 29.

The issues of health care and wage increases for merit lie at the center of the dispute. The company's proposal calls for increasing family health care costs by nearly \$100 a month while office workers at Miller breweries in North Carolina and Texas pay just \$16 a month for family coverage. Workers are opposed to a clause that provides wage increases

on a merit basis. This would allow only three or four employees to earn top-performer status.

Miners face sellout after four-year strike

The leadership of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) has recommended to their membership a deal which would see the elimination of most of the jobs of strikers at Goldcorp Inc. in Red Lake, Ontario. If ratified it would bring to an end one of the longest strikes in Canadian history.

One hundred eighty-seven members of USWA Local 950 went on strike at the gold mine in northwestern Ontario in June of 1996, but the company refused to bargain, using the money saved on wages to invest in new exploration. There are now only about 100 workers left, the rest having gone to other jobs, and only 45 of those are expected to be rehired if the contract is accepted.

The union originally held that it would not settle for anything less than a full job guarantee, but is proposing acceptance of the layoffs in exchange for signing bonuses of \$1,500 and an improved severance package of four weeks, up from the previous offer of three weeks for every year worked. The offer must be accepted by April 20 or the company says it will contract out the work as it has done in the past.

Calgary Herald strike in sixth month

The strike by employees at the *Calgary Herald*, in its sixth month, has become increasingly contentious and controversial. Members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP), which represents newsroom employees, and of the Graphic Communications International Union (GCIU), which includes mailroom, loading dock, maintenance and machine shop workers, about 230 in total, went on strike last November 8 for a first contract. Conrad Black, head of the Hollinger newspaper chain that owns the *Herald* and most dailies across Canada, has refused any possibility of a union contract.

Last week several church leaders offered themselves as mediators in the strike following a public exchange between a Catholic Bishop and Black. Bishop Frederick Henry of Calgary had made statements in the Catholic Register calling into question Black's understanding of the church's moral teachings, which he said unequivocally support the right of workers to organize. Black shot back in an editorial, viciously denouncing the bishop as a "pinko commie," among other things.

In a separate incident, Alberta Premier Ralph Klein called into question the "objectivity" of journalists who had been on strike, saying, "Philosophically, speaking now as a journalist, I have a problem with the objectivity component of journalists striking and following the settlement of a strike to report objectively on a labour matter." He went on to suggest that journalists should not be allowed to strike at all. Klein's government has constantly refused to impose arbitration despite repeated requests from the union.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact