

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 April 2000

Bolivia lifts state of siege

In the face of massive opposition, the government of President Hugo Banzer lifted the state of siege in Bolivia, which had been imposed in an attempt to quell the wave of protests that began when water rates in the city of Cochabamba were raised by 300 percent. The repression was not able to stop the protests, in the course of which there were six killed, 83 wounded and more than 120 arrested.

One year later, Paraguay's crisis continues

A year ago, Paraguayan President Luis Gonzalez Macchi's inauguration was marred by massive protests. Macchi took power following the assassination of Vice President Luis Maria Aragana and the resignation of President Raul Cubas. Gonzales Macchi has been unable to apprehend and punish those guilty of the murder.

Since then Paraguay has been on the edge of a political precipice. On March 27 urban and rural workers marched demanding agrarian reform and the suspension of a policy of privatizations. The protest was severely repressed by police. Several protesters were severely beaten; one was shot in the head and killed.

The following day, Gonzales Macchi announced that an agreement had been reached with the protesters, which included guarantees of land for peasants. He also promised a total of \$65 million in aid over the next three years.

Also in March, 30,000 small farmers marched on Paraguay's capital, Asuncion, to demand credits and technical assistance. On March 24 the Democratic Lawyers Network organized a strike to commemorate the seven students who were killed a year ago, following Argana's death. The lawyers mobilized 25,000 protesters, and when Gonzales Macchi made an unexpected appearance, the crowd yelled for him to leave and threw stones at him, demanding that the government keep its promises to workers and peasants.

New social protests in Ecuador

Last week, a 100 percent increase in transit fares provoked new protests in Ecuador. On April 18, high school and university students demonstrated in Quito, Guayaquil and other Ecuadorian cities. Other measures approved by the government led to increases in basic consumer items throughout the country.

Indian groups also demanded a roll-back in fares, a freeze on fuel prices and the confiscation of the assets of corrupt bankers. Indian leaders also revealed plans for a 48-hour stoppage on May 1 against the dollarization of the currency and for freedom for political prisoners.

Meanwhile, 40,000 public employees remain on strike after one week. They are rejecting a 10 percent raise in wages (about \$2 a month) proposed by the government of President Gustavo Noboa.

Argentine workers battle police

Workers belonging to the General Federation of Labor (CGT) carried out a mass protest against a draft labor law being debated by the Argentine Congress. Early on Wednesday, April 19 a confrontation with Buenos Aires police left 35 workers injured; fifty others were arrested. Julio Piumato, the leader of the court workers union, was shot in the testicles. Video footage from the Argentine media recorded instances of police brutality, and 14 officers have been arrested.

Five hundred truck drivers had assembled at dawn on April 19 near the Congress building. They had set up a soup kitchen to feed the protesters, when the police attacked them with rubber bullets and fierce beatings.

The draft legislation being proposed by Argentine President Fernando De La Rúa would make it easier to fire workers. It would also eliminate industry-wide contracts and increase probationary periods for new hires. The logic behind such legislation is to force workers to accept lower wages and working conditions. Argentina's unemployment stands at around 14 percent. CGT leaders charge that these employment policies are being dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

On April 20, court workers, truck drivers, transit workers and refuse workers struck in protest. At a rally in Buenos Aires, over 2,000 workers protested the police attack and denounced the labor law. "This labor reform can only be imposed through beatings and repression," declared truck driver leader Hugo Moyano at the rally.

The repression of Buenos Aires workers was not an isolated incident. On April 4, firemen and police in the provincial capital of Corrientes savagely attacked a "March for Justice" that takes place every Tuesday. Fire hoses were directed against the protesters, which included the wives and mothers of victims of police repression. The Corrientes Police are notorious for their brutality.

Radio and television advertising actors set for strike

About 135,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) involved in production of commercials for radio and television will strike May 1 unless the advertisers' industry renews talks in an effort to conclude a new contract. On April 18 the two unions' joint board representing the Western United States voted 71-0 to strike, just two days after its counterpart in the East voted 79-0 for a work stoppage.

The advertisers, represented by the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies, are seeking to do away with the "pay per play" formula, which pays actors for each airing of ads on broadcast networks, and replace it with a flat fee. The unions are attempting to expand the pay-per-play formula to ads on cable TV and want to discuss a

formula for the Internet.

The advertisers are adamant about their position. "The industry is prepared for the SAG/AFTRA strike and plans to implement its strike contingency plan in order to continue production as usual during a strike," declared the advertisers' chief negotiator, John McGuinn. Agencies have already implemented a policy of "double-casting" for upcoming ads whereby both union and nonunion actors are scripted for roles in commercials.

In place of the network "pay-per-play" formula, advertisers are offering actors a flat fee of \$2,575 for unlimited use of commercials during a 13-week cycle. Revenue for cable TV networks skyrocketed \$500 million during the first quarter to a record \$2.3 billion—a 33 percent increase over the same period last year and a 71 percent increase over the first quarter of 1998.

"It boggles my mind," said Brett Gilbert, a union actor, "that with all the money that advertisers are making that they don't want to share it with actors."

Tentative agreement between Northwest Airlines and flight attendants

Northwest Airlines and the union representing its 11,000 flight attendants reached a new tentative agreement April 20 in the drawn-out negotiations dating back to 1996. Complete details of the agreement, which came out of talks in Seattle, are to be released to flight attendants April 24.

The last tentative agreement, hailed by Teamsters International President James Hoffa and Local 2000 which represents Northwest flight attendants, was reached in July of last year and went down to a resounding defeat with a 69 percent no vote. In the new agreement the Teamsters are emphasizing new improvements in pensions agreed to by Northwest in the most recent round of talks. In last year's proposal monthly pension rates, which are multiplied by years of service, were raised from \$35 to \$55 in the first year, and then increased to \$62.50 more than four years later. The new agreement sets pension rates at \$65 from the moment the new contract is signed.

On wages—among the most sensitive issues—it is less clear. Flight attendants accepted pay cuts starting in 1993 to help Northwest avoid bankruptcy and didn't see pay increases for most of that decade. Meanwhile Northwest recovered and chalked up record profits while executives raked in millions in compensation. In February the company raised wages by 4 percent for flight attendants and machinists—the only two employee bargaining units without contracts at Northwest.

Pay for flight attendants range from an appalling \$15,000 for new hires to more than \$40,000 for the highest paid. The new proposal, like last year's, is supposed to raise the lower pay brackets up to industry standards. The union says pay increases will range from 8 percent to 27.7 percent, up only slightly from the previous agreement's 6 percent to 24 percent.

Many other issues of concern to flight attendants may be concealed from the public at this point. But the sharpest contrast between this year's tentative agreement and that of last year is the heightened collaboration between the Teamsters bureaucracy and the company against the flight attendants. The Teamsters union allowed Northwest to run roughshod over workers. The company fired attendants, cracked down on union dissidents who ran web

sites and filed a lawsuit against the union. The union removed one flight attendant from the negotiating committee for attempting to inform rank-and-file workers that their demands were being betrayed at the bargaining table.

Last year the Teamsters allowed flight attendants two months from the release of the proposal until the final vote to familiarize themselves with the tentative agreement. Opponents of that agreement utilized that time period to argue against it by way of bulk email, web pages and Internet message boards. This time around the union will only allow five weeks.

No talks in Massachusetts nurses strike

No talks have materialized in the three-week-old strike by nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Nurses Association has proposed several dates and a federal mediator has called for negotiations, but hospital management has not responded.

More than 500 nurses are walking picket lines while the hospital strains to operate with out-of-state nurses and 100 union members who have crossed the line since the strike's inception. The strike was provoked by the demand for mandatory overtime by the hospital's owner, Tenet Healthcare System.

The ever-increasing drive to extract profits by private health plans, abetted by government policy, has resulted in hospitals being forced to increase workloads on the nursing workforce in order to keep down staffing costs.

The nurses union, unable to confront the economic and political forces dictating healthcare practices, is preparing for a long strike. A career councilor has been brought in for tutoring nurses and updating resumes while a committee has been established to help strikers find other jobs. Already 100 nurses have obtained other employment.

High school student strike rattles Nova Scotia Tory government

High school students staged walkouts in Halifax, Sydney and many other Nova Scotia cities and towns April 19 and 20 to protest against the provincial Tory government's plan to slash \$27 million from the education budget. Tory Premier John Hamm, who won election last summer promising to safeguard public services and balance the provincial budget, told hundreds of students who had rallied outside the provincial legislature that the Tories will not cede to pressure to rescind the cuts. Nova Scotia, declared Hamm, has no choice but to follow other governments in eliminating its deficit and reducing provincial debt.

The province's school boards have said the funding cut will force them to eliminate 800 teacher jobs and hundreds of non-teaching positions, increase class sizes, and eliminate fine arts and other so-called specialty programs. The Halifax Regional School Board, the province's largest, will issue 360 layoff notices to teachers April 25. The Tories dispute the need for layoffs, but do concede at least 400 teacher jobs will be lost province-wide.



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