

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 May 2000

## **Guatemalan police fatally attack demonstrators protesting transit fare increases**

On Thursday, April 27 at least six protesters were killed and 18 wounded when security guards attacked mass demonstrations in Guatemala against a proposed 25 to 36 percent increase in transit fares. One of the dead was Roberto Martinez, a press photographer for the daily *Prensa Libre*. The guards, two of whom were arrested, claimed that they were trying to protect a shopping mall against looting.

The protests increased on April 28 as thousands of students took to the streets of Guatemala City. The government has announced that it is prepared to take drastic measures, including the imposition of a state of siege, if the protests continue. At the same time, President Alfonso Portillo called on private transportation companies to roll back the fare increase.

## **Nicaraguan health workers begin national protest**

On Friday, April 28, Nicaraguan health workers marched in Managua to demand that the government sign a contract and approve a minimum wage of US\$200 a month.

Gustavo Porras, leader of the Health Workers Federation (FETSALUD), said that the government has created 17 phony government unions linked to the party in power (Liberal Constitutional Party) to sabotage negotiations. This same tactic was used successfully by the government against the teachers.

The march also protested a 50 percent increase in Social Security fees. "This is robbery, because the legislation to privatize pensions has not been duly approved and it is unconstitutional," said Porras.

## **Ecuadorian government insists on economic measures as protests increase**

Pedrom Pinto Rubianes, vice president of Ecuador, declared that to meet the goals of less than 10 percent inflation in 2000 and less than 12 percent in 2001 the government is eliminating subsidies for bottled gas (for cooking,) gasoline and electricity.

Rubianes, posturing as a friend of the oppressed, said that inflation has been a heavy tax on the poor. The way to benefit them, according to Rubianes, was through price stability.

The vice president's words did not convince very many,

however. Mass protests continued on April 26-27 near Ecuador's Central University in Quito against transit increases. On April 27 students seized several buses and stored them at the university. The students declared that the government's economic policies were hurting the masses of people. The police guarded government buildings in Quito, with tear gas at the ready to be used against the students.

## **Union calls for general strike after Argentine Senate approves labor reforms**

Hugo Moyano, a leader of the Movement of Argentine Workers (MTA), one of the three wings of the Argentine Trade Union federation (CGT), has called for a national strike on May 5 if Congress enacts labor reform legislation. In Argentina, Moyano said, "power is in the hands of the IMF." Following a month of discussion the Argentine Senate approved the labor measure, which limits workers' rights and makes it easier to lay off workers. The House of Representative must now vote on the legislation.

## **Venezuelan teachers threaten to strike**

On April 28 Venezuela's teachers threatened an indefinite national strike if the government fails to respond to their wage demands by May 2. The teachers are pressing for a 100 percent raise. On Thursday, April 27, teachers marched through downtown Caracas. They rallied at Miraflores Palace, Venezuela's presidential building, to petition President Hugo Chavez. The Chavez government is offering less than half of what the teachers want.

## **Suburban Chicago janitor strike ends**

The 10-day strike by Chicago's 4,500 suburban janitors ended April 28 with the approval of a three-year contract. While the strike forced the Suburban Contractors to provide insurance coverage for families as opposed to its original position of maintaining single-person coverage for the employee, it raised wages by a paltry \$1.35 for workers who made only \$6.65 an hour under the old contract.

Ken Munz, spokesperson for Local 1 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), tried to palm off the pro-management settlement by saying, "When you compare that to what we had before we struck, we see it as a great victory." Another SEIU official said the union would not even bother to send out ballots for a ratification vote, after a meeting of 800 out of the 4,600 strikers approved the back-

to-work deal.

From the beginning of the strike the SEIU leadership had no intention of conducting a serious struggle to win improvements for the low-wage workers. It called for a rolling strike that only brought out 500 janitors on the first day and gradually added a few hundred workers to the picket lines each day. The union bureaucracy segregated the suburban janitors from the 5,500 downtown Chicago janitors, whose contract was settled after a one-day strike for \$1.10 over three years. Under the old contract the highest paid downtown janitors received \$11.50 an hour.

The Chicago strikes follow a pattern of containment by the SEIU leadership of janitors' struggles throughout the country. Last week the SEIU settled a three-week strike in Los Angeles for wage increases between \$1.50 and \$1.90 over three years. Local 1877 President Mike Garcia called the deal covering the mostly Latin American immigrant workforce a victory, because "in three years we will have lifted our members above the federal poverty line." Several cities still face contract expirations over the next few months, including Oakland and Silicon Valley, California; Cleveland and Seattle.

#### **Strike ends at Lockheed plant in Texas**

Lockheed Martin machinists voted 1,514 to 246 on April 26 to end their 17-day strike after union and company negotiators reached a deal at the fighter assembly and maintenance plant in Fort Worth, Texas. The new agreement contains a 10 percent wage increase over the life of the three-year agreement and offers a \$900 ratification bonus with an immediate \$1,200 cost-of-living adjustment and another \$600 cost-of-living payment at the end of the year.

In the wake of last year's gains by machinists at Boeing, which included a \$4,000 bonus, the 2,300 members of the International Association of Machinist Local 776 at Lockheed rejected the original proposal endorsed by the local union leadership. Lockheed machinists made an average \$20 an hour under the old contract. But workers complained that they trailed Boeing machinists by \$2.56 an hour and demanded the addition of bonuses.

#### **Talks between American Airlines and pilots union fail to extend contract**

Contract talks between the Allied Pilots Association (APA) and American Airlines have broken off without an agreement to extend the current contract which expires in August of 2001. Among the issues over which talks became snagged was the push by American's regional carrier American Eagle to add new 70-seat jets.

The move would violate an agreement in APA's contract which limits American Eagle to 67 regional jets and requires all jets with 51 or more seats to be flown by an American Airline pilot. American Eagle's pilots are represented by

another union. The two sides also failed to agree on pay increases and management's demand for a cap on contributions to the retiree medical plan.

Early in 1999 American pilots launched a sick-out against the company's attempt to integrate pilots from newly acquired Reno Air under wages inferior to the APA—an issue which also violated the union's contract. A federal judge fined the union \$45.5 million for the job action. Last fall, with the fine still dangling over the union's head, the judge ordered the APA to open negotiations with the company to extend the present contract. According to American Airlines, it expects to renew talks early next year.

#### **Union abandons northern Ontario gold miners after four-year battle**

The longest strike in Canadian history has come to an ignominious end at Goldcorp's Red Lake mine in northern Ontario, it was announced Friday, April 28. As part of the deal accepted by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), which represents the miners, only 45 of the original 187 strikers will have jobs, and the union has agreed that they will no longer represent workers at the mine.

Since the strike began in June 1996, Goldcorp Inc. has refused to negotiate a union contract, directing the wages saved from the strike into new exploration which is now paying off handsomely. The company had threatened to sign a new contractor by the end of April, a provocative action which would have exposed the weakness of the union leadership.

From the outset, the USWA bureaucracy isolated the strike, while nearly half of the original strikers eventually left to seek other employment. The union recently recommended the deal which would allow the company to choose only 45 of the 100 strikers to be kept on, the others receiving the \$1,500 signing bonus and an improved severance package.

Significantly the USWA is allowing the mine to continue running as a nonunion operation. This capitulation was apparently motivated by the union leadership's desire to cut its losses, including halting strike pay, and reach a settlement at any cost.



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