

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 May 2000

Brazil landless occupy buildings

Tens of thousands of landless agricultural workers have occupied state and federal government buildings throughout Brazil. The protest campaign, organized by the Landless Workers Movement to demand land reform, exploded in a series of violent confrontations after the government of President Cardoso responded with large-scale repressive measures.

The biggest clash last week took place as hundreds of police were mobilized outside the city of Curitiba, capital of Parana state, to block 3,000 demonstrators from entering the city. Police used tear gas, rubber billets and dogs to disperse the protesters, who were unarmed or equipped only with sticks. One farmworker was killed and at least 200 injured.

Protests have taken place in at least 20 of Brazil's 26 states, with dozens of arrests and many hundreds of workers injured. Demonstrators supporting the demands of the MST (the group's initials in Portuguese), have effectively taken control of government buildings in a dozen states, singing songs, chanting slogans and blocking access to the facilities.

Three percent of Brazil's population owns 66 percent of the arable land, while the distribution of overall wealth is the most unequal of any country in the world. The Cardoso government has made a few gestures in support of land reform, in the face of a wave of squatting and land seizures by the rural poor. Raul Jungmann, the minister of agrarian development, issued a warning over the occupations, declaring, "We also have laws, and the Landless Workers Movement has to respect them."

Peasant strike in Peru

On April 30, 30,000 peasants from the Province of Apurimac entered the third day of a strike against the government of Alberto Fujimori. They are protesting the absence of government help to lift their region from abject poverty. Apurimac is one of the poorest provinces in Peru, with 80 percent of its peasants subsisting on potatoes.

The province is located on the Andes, 450 kilometers (about 300 miles) southeast of Peru's capital Lima, near the city of Cuzco. The peasants have been suffering from a drop in potato prices. It takes 32 kilos of potatoes to purchase one kilo of sugar; 600 kilos of sugar to buy a 25-kilo bag of fertilizer.

As part of their protest thousands of peasants have blocked access to the provincial capital of Andahuaylas.

Colombian unions denounce right-wing violence

On April 30 the Colombian Labor Federation (CUT) denounced the right-wing campaign of terror against trade union supporters.

The latest incident took place in the central Colombian city of Barrancabermeja on the Magdalena River Valley north of Bogota. Two oil refinery workers and two cement quarry workers, all

union members, were assassinated on April 27.

Barrancabermeja has been a target of right-wing terror since May 1998. Amnesty International charges that the paramilitary death squads work in collusion with the Colombian military. (*See* <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/1999/colombia09161999.html> for more information.)

Uruguayan labor federation calls for June strike

On May 1, CSU (Uruguayan Labor Federation) and the CNT (National Workers Convention) agreed to carry out a national strike on June 8.

With Uruguay's economic crisis worsening, the unions are demanding drastic policies to reduce unemployment. Union leaders denounced President Jorge Batlle's refusal to accept their demands.

Labor negotiations have broken down in new collective bargaining agreements for the private sector.

Panamanian workers protest on May 1

On May 1 more than 1,000 workers marched through Panama City to celebrate International Labor Day. They demanded a \$500-a-month minimum wage and an end to corruption and privatizations.

They denounced the privatization of the state telephone company, and the use of privatization benefits to pay \$1.3 billion to the foreign banks.

Presently, the minimum wage is \$250 to \$300 a month. The government of President Mireya Moscoso says that there is no money to lift wages.

Workers and Indians protest in Ecuador

Thousands marched in Ecuador's capital of Quito and many other cities on International Labor Day. All these marches demanded a change in the government's economic policies. The demonstrations rejected dollarization, corruption and the high cost of living.

In Quito, Indians occupied the Church of San Francisco to publicize the political persecution they face by the government of President Gustavo Noboa. Traditionally, May 1 marches rally at this church, which is in the vicinity of the presidential residence.

Noboa declared that though economic prospects are good, it will take a very long time for Ecuador to recover.

On May 2, the teachers unions announced plans for a national strike later on in the week.

Mexican workers mark May Day, noting falling living standards

As Mexican workers celebrated May Day, news came out that since 1994 their purchasing power had dropped by 47.2 percent.

The Social Studies department of the National Autonomous University (UNAM) issued the report, which said that Mexican

workers "produce more" but that they are "buying less." The benefits of their increased productivity have largely gone to the capitalist class. The report talks about the "super-exploitation" of labor along with reduced benefits.

While workers' productivity in the auto and maquiladora industries has increased by a factor of five, none of the rewards have gone to the workers.

Since President Ernesto Zedillo took office in 1994, the 47 percent drop compares with the 46.5 percent drop during Carlos Salinas's term and the 44.9 percent drop during Miguel de la Madrid's term.

The Mexican economy has been unable to provide enough jobs to accommodate new entrants into the labor force every year.

National strike in Argentina

A national strike paralyzed Buenos Aires on May 5, the first general strike against President Fernando De la Rúa, who took office last December. The strike was called by a section of the Argentine Union Federation (CGT) opposing a new labor law.

The government claims that the draft legislation will introduce flexibility into the labor market, lower costs of hiring and stimulate employment. Union leaders insist that the law will make it easier for employers to carry out mass layoffs.

The streets of the capital were empty as schools, hospitals and most government offices were closed. Trucking, airline, and public transit workers also participated in the strike.

Ohio State workers reject contract, continue strike

Ohio State University custodial workers rejected a second contract May 5 in the week-old strike that has closed campus cafeterias and slowed campus services. Strikers who gathered at the union hall tore up and spat on the new tentative agreement agreed by the union and university negotiators.

The contract, covering 1,900 members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 4501, was rejected by a 845 to 330 vote. The contract is virtually the same agreement as the previously defeated contract which offered a \$1 increase in the first year followed by 50 cents in the second and third years. Workers, who make an average \$10 an hour, are demanding an immediate \$2-an-hour wage hike.

Some faculty who support the strike have gone so far as to hold classes outside rather than cross picket lines, while others have canceled classes. Both poet Maya Angelou and NAACP President Kweisi Mfume canceled appearances that were scheduled last week, due to the work stoppage.

The campus newspaper the *Lantern* reports that the new tentative agreement submitted to workers by the CWA contains a clause that would count all workers who choose not to vote on the proposal as "yes" votes.

Northwest Airlines worker wins settlement against company for wrongful firing

The Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination issued an order to Northwest Airlines requiring it to pay \$200,000 plus interest in damages to a former baggage handler. The employee, Debra Mazeikus, filed a complaint against Northwest in 1995 charging she was wrongfully fired by the company due to a written statement she provided for an earlier sexual harassment case involving a coworker. Northwest refused to make accommodations

on the job for Mazeikus, who has a disability.

The written testimony was submitted in a case brought by the family of Northwest employee Susan Taraskiewicz, aged 27, whom they claimed suffered repeated sexual harassment on the job. Taraskiewicz, was found dead in the trunk of her car in 1992 in what is still an unsolved case.

Calgary Herald strike widens

May Day commemorations last week marked a new stage in the six-month-old strike at the *Calgary Herald*. Last Tuesday, May 2, pressmen and other workers at the paper were locked out, joining reporters, copy editors, photographers and graphic artists, members of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers union (CEP) who have been on strike for a first contract since last November 8. Issues in dispute range from job security to wages and overtime.

The lockout came after a day of cross-Canada protests May 1 against the *Herald* and its parent company, Hollinger Inc., which caused delays in the circulation of both the *Herald* and Hollinger's national daily, the *National Post*. The 105 workers, including press operators, platemakers, paper handlers and mailroom workers, are members of the Graphic Communications International Union (CGIU). On Tuesday, May 2 they were given the required 72 hours notice, which would have started the lockout on Friday, May 5, but they were told to leave immediately, an illegal action on the part of the company. Scab replacements were brought in even before the lockout was announced and production has continued uninterrupted.

Following an overwhelming rejection of a contract offer, the union had voted 96 percent in favor of a strike last month. Their previous contract expired at the end of March. Bargaining had continued until Tuesday afternoon, when the company gave the lockout notice, only hours after the company had presented a revised offer. The union said it was not given adequate time to present the new offer to the membership.

The strike has become a potential rallying issue for labor in recent months, with the union pitted against the stridently anti-union Conrad Black, owner of Hollinger and the *Herald*. The unions involved, however, have been markedly cautious in this fight, a one-day national protest last February being the most recent action prior to the May Day protest. They have allowed scab replacements to maintain publication of the paper, and some of the striking workers are in fact members of CGIU, the same union which was just locked out.

Despite a boycott of the *National Post*, which was launched in December, it is clear that the union leadership wants to avoid an all-out confrontation with Black, who controls over 60 percent of daily newspaper circulation in Canada, including the financially troubled *Post*. Such a battle would implicitly raise the prospect of industry-wide action.



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