

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 May 2000

## **Unemployed confront police in Argentina**

In the northwestern Province of Salta, Argentinean workers battled police May 12 during protests demanding jobs and subsidies for an employment program. One worker was killed, apparently from the effects of tear gas, and 50 others were wounded. Police attacked pickets blocking a highway with rubber bullets and tear gas.

"The worker plan," which pays unemployed workers up to US\$200 a month to clean streets and labor in public projects, was scheduled to be eliminated last December under provisions outlined by the IMF. Instead, in order to quell popular opposition, the government expanded the program to cover a total of 83,000 unemployed workers, but benefits have not reached many provinces. Salta is one of Argentina's poorest provinces, with an official unemployment rate far exceeding the national rate of 14 percent.

The workers blocked access to an oil refinery and interrupted road travel into Bolivia. Workers also set fire to the City Hall of General Mosconi, as thousands took to the streets in outrage at the police assault. Following the street battle, the De la Rúa government announced that an agreement had been reached with the workers and Vice President Carlos Alvarez called for new talks with international lenders on programs earmarked for the poverty-stricken northern provinces. The national government took a low-key approach to this latest crisis, claiming that local officials were to blame for the lack of employment programs in Salta. In fact, press reports indicate that over 100 localities are in the same situation and could explode at any moment.

## **Indigenous people protest social crisis in Ecuador**

On Monday, May 8 Ecuadorian Indian leaders rejected the dollarization of the economy and warned President Gustavo Noboa that they will launch national protests against his economic plan. The demonstrations will also protest increases in fuel and electricity rates, which were demanded by the International Monetary

Fund. There are reports that this year's inflation will reach 150 percent. This July, the price of fuel is expected to jump by 90 percent, natural gas by 80 percent and electricity by 70 percent.

## **Paraguayan workers oppose privatization law**

Telephone workers in Paraguay are threatening strike action against a draft privatization measure proposed last week by President Luis Gonzalez Macchi. The measure cancels collective bargaining clauses that mandate severance pay. The draft law also gives the government the right to decree "labor emergencies," granting it the right to impose involuntary retirement and layoff of public employees.

## **United Airlines pilots carry out job action**

United Airlines was forced to cancel hundreds of flights last week because many pilots have been refusing to work overtime due to a lack of progress in contract talks. The Airline Pilots Association (ALPA), which disassociated itself from the job action, says wages, job security and benefits remain in dispute.

A spokesperson from the Chicago-based airline said the pilots' contract became amendable April 12 and talks continue under a federal mediator. Under federal law, airline contracts do not expire and most airline workers are prohibited from striking unless they receive permission from the National Mediation Board. Last year, a federal judge fined the Allied Pilots Association (APA) \$45.5 million for a 10-day sick-out by American Airlines pilots against contract violations and the outsourcing of jobs to the company's low-cost affiliate.

## **Boeing engineers oppose huge salary hike for union official**

Charles Bofferding, the head of the engineering workers' union at Boeing, was forced to give up his claim to more than \$25,000 in increased pay after complaints from members threatened to affect a crucial upcoming election. Bofferding, executive director of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), stood to receive a 20 percent

increase in his annual salary if members voted this summer to make union dues mandatory. SPEEA won the right to hold the so-called agency-shop vote after its 40-day walkout against the Seattle aerospace company.

The pay hike angered many SPEEA members, who gave up nearly six weeks' pay during the strike but settled for \$2,500 bonuses that in many cases covered less than half of their lost wages. Based on Bofferding's base pay of \$127,893, a 20 percent boost would have netted him more than \$25,000 a year. Bofferding and other union leaders initially opposed strike action and endorsed a settlement that was overwhelmingly rejected by the rank and file.

### **Commercial actors continue strike against advertisers**

Tens of thousands of actors who perform in television and radio are continuing their strike, begun May 1, against advertisers' demands to pay a flat fee for ads instead of residual compensation when commercials run on network TV. The strike pits 135,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) against a coalition of advertisers who are seeking to end the nearly 50-year-old pay structure and impose the same flat fee now used on cable TV.

The advertisers, backed up by some of the most powerful media conglomerates, have taken a hard line and are attempting to continue to shoot ads with nonunion actors and union members who have crossed picket lines. The unions have limited the strike to appeals to the National Labor Relations Board and to major companies which use the advertising agencies.

Two striking actors unions filed an unfair labor practice complaint against advertisers May 12, claiming they are refusing to bargain over pay for work in commercials shown on the Internet. The ad industry is failing to bargain in good faith, the unions said in a statement.

The unions have also undermined the solidarity of the strike by allowing certain producers, who agreed to the unions' terms, to shoot their ads during the strike. So far, more than 300 companies have signed the unions' interim agreements.

### **Nova Scotia nurses protest health care cuts**

Hundreds of nurses and other hospital and nursing home workers rallied outside the Nova Scotia legislature May 12 to protest a cut of \$83 million, or

almost 5 percent, in the province's health care budget. The protest was triggered by the previous day's announcement that an additional 310 jobs are to be eliminated at Halifax's most important health facility, the Queen Elizabeth II Health and Sciences Centre. Earlier this year the center cut 103 jobs.

The cut is part of a \$295 million package of spending cuts imposed by the Tory provincial government in its maiden budget. "Because of this budget, people in Nova Scotia will have an unsafe, inadequate health-care system," Nova Scotia Nurses Union President Heather Henderson told last Friday's rally. "Nurses will have more responsibility heaped on their already overburdened shoulders." The cuts are being implemented even though Nova Scotia Health Minister Jamie Muir himself admitted last year that the province faces a severe nursing shortage.

Following widespread protests by students and teachers in the province, the government announced that it would restore some of the money cut from school boards in last month's budget so teacher layoffs could be forestalled. Still, hundreds of teachers' jobs will be cut through attrition and the government has vowed it will find the money for the school boards by cutting elsewhere in the Education Ministry budget.



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