

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 May 2000

## **Teachers and public employees on strike in Ecuador**

On May 15, 140,000 basic education and secondary school teachers began an indefinite work stoppage in Ecuador, following the collapse of negotiations with the government of Gustavo Noboa. The teachers are demanding a larger budget for education.

In an interview with the *Pulsar* news agency, Samuel Vargas, vice president of the National Educators Union (UNE), declared that one of the main objectives of the strike was to defend free public education. A law to privatize education is currently being studied in Congress. He also indicated that teachers' salaries are between \$45 and \$83 a month.

Last year's devaluation of Ecuador's sucre, the replacement of the national currency by the US dollar and continuing domestic inflation are causing malnutrition and creating hardship among a significant layer of Ecuador's population.

## **Mexican teachers protest**

More than 185,000 teachers in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacan and Oaxaca have gone on strike to demand better working conditions and decent wages. At the same time teachers from 15 Mexican states and the Federal District have set up camps in Mexico City's central square (the *Zocalo*), across from the Public Education Department and in front of the offices of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE), to press their demands.

## **Bolivian teachers demand 50 percent wage increase**

Teachers in the Bolivian capital of La Paz have begun mobilizations to demand a 50 percent increase in salaries. On May 18 the protests began with a march of teachers and parents in the city. Other protests are scheduled for May 23 and 30.

## **Police attack Sao Paulo protest**

On May 18, police violently attacked a peaceful demonstration of several thousand public employees and students in Sao Paulo, Brazil. As protesters invaded the lanes of Paulista Avenue reserved for mass transit they were attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. At least two protesters were injured.

Brazil's economic reforms and monetary stability measures have sharply undermined the living standards of the working class and rural poor. At the same time corporate profits have

increased. Officially, there are 54 million poor in Brazil, out of a population of 168 million.

## **Mexican students demand release of imprisoned protest leaders**

Students occupied the offices of the accounting department of Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM) for 24 hours on May 19. The protesters demanded the release of the remaining imprisoned leaders of the General Strike Committee, who have been in jail since last February when the federal police broke up a 10-month-long strike at UNAM in defense of the right to low-cost, public education.

## **New York nurses strike concluded**

The five-month strike by 400 registered nurses at Nyack Hospital in New York ended May 19 after union members ratified by a 3-1 margin a new contract providing for raises of 12.5 percent by the year 2002. The hospital waged a bitter campaign against members of the New York State Nurses Association by forcing a strike over the winter months. When management announced it would hire permanent replacements for any striker who did not return to work by April 24, only four nurses responded by crossing picket lines. Nurses are scheduled to return to work May 30.

## **SEIU convention touts growth in membership**

The annual convention of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) turned into a celebration as President Andrew Stern announced that the union was now the largest affiliate of the AFL-CIO. New recruitment brought SEIU membership up to 1.3 million and allowed it to surpass both the Teamsters and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Several prominent strikes by janitors in Los Angeles, Chicago and other major cities brought the SEIU into the media spotlight for a brief time this year. The determined strikers, comprising some of the most oppressed workers—many undocumented immigrants—were fighting to overcome poverty wages. The role of the SEIU was to frustrate and betray this movement with meager settlements on the building maintenance industry's terms.

The SEIU also represents many workers in the home health care industry which is notorious for its low wages and poor working conditions. It is this sector that has allowed the SEIU to expand its membership. Last year the union won a

vote to represent 74,000 Los Angeles County home-care workers in what it hopes to be the first of many.

The SEIU bureaucracy spent nearly half its annual national budget on organizing campaigns to bring in new members. The emphasis here is on the expansion of the union's dues-paying membership and not a qualitative change in the living standards of its membership.

The concern of the union could be seen in the speakers who appeared at its convention: Vice President Al Gore, New York Senate candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt—who all received the union's endorsement for upcoming elections. The union will also be running television ads in both Los Angeles and Philadelphia, cities where the Democratic and Republican national conventions will be held.

#### **UAW settles local contracts with GM in record time**

Boasting of their close labor-management relations, officials from the United Auto Workers and General Motors announced they had reached local labor agreements at each of the 76 UAW-represented GM plants. The final deal was signed last week, covering work rules, seniority and staffing at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck large car plant. The deal came just 215 days after a four-year deal was signed, which gives the number one automaker a green light to continue downsizing, in exchange for wage increases. In 1996 it took 348 days to settle local contracts, after a number of costly walkouts. Ratification votes remain to be held at several plants, including those in Orion Township and Pontiac, Michigan, where workers rejected earlier deals.

#### **Alaska Airlines worker killed on the job**

An Alaska Airlines Baggage handler was killed while working on the job at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport May 19. Nineteen-year-old Donovan Thater was operating a tug, a vehicle which pulls wagons carrying luggage, at the time of the accident. According to reports, Thater pulled the tug alongside a plane and jumped off to begin loading luggage. But the tug continued to move and crushed him against the side of the plane. Two other workers rushed to extract Thater but he died before an ambulance could take him to a hospital. While complete details of the incident are not known, the past period of job-slashing and speedups imposed on workers in the airline industry—all accepted by the unions—have created conditions ripe for accidents.

#### **Alberta health care strike looms**

Over 10,000 health care workers in the western province of Alberta could go on strike this Wednesday, May 24, if no agreement can be reached. The walkout would be in defiance of no-strike laws. While the disputed issues are salaries and working conditions, this action raises broader political questions following the passage of Bill 11 by the Tory Klein government, which makes provision for a two-

tiered health care system in the province.

The strike would be the largest in Alberta's history, affecting health care workers across the province at 159 hospitals and clinics. The workers affected include nurses, ambulance attendants and hospital support staff represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. The union lost a court action May 19 to win the legal right to strike for all their members and, as a result, the strike would be deemed illegal for all but about 1,200 of the workers involved.

Nurses, who had previously overwhelmingly rejected a mediator's report, are seeking a 14 percent pay raise over two years and reduced workloads. The province has offered 5 percent over two years. The union issued a 72-hour strike notice on Saturday, May 20, demanding a resolution with provincial negotiators. The province has since applied for a cease-and-desist order with the Alberta Labour Relations Board, which is expected to rule against the union. In addition, the province's employment minister has threatened back-to-work legislation if the strike goes forward.

A strike by health care workers in Alberta would have importance beyond the inherent impact of its size and scope. The publicly funded health care system has been under assault across Canada and the government of Ralph Klein in Alberta has been in the forefront of that attack. With the recent passage of Bill 11, the Alberta Tories have set a precedent for other provinces to address the health care crisis created by government cuts, by opening the door to privatization. The enormous public opposition provoked by the passage of this bill would undoubtedly be brought to bear in support of a strike.



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