

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 May 2000

## Strikes, protests by utility workers in Honduras

Last Friday, May 26, 3,500 employees of the Honduran Telephone Company initiated a strike to demand payment of a yearly bonus based on profits by the company. The bonus is usually distributed in April. The Honduran Telephone Company, which is being privatized, employs 4,000 workers, mainly in the capital city of Tegucigalpa. The government plans to sell off 51 percent of the company by June 29.

Just days before, on May 24, over 1,000 workers, students and teachers protested in Tegucigalpa against the Honduran government's decision to proceed with the privatization of public services. They rallied in front of the Congress building after a four-hour march. The protest was organized by the Popular Block (BP), composed of the right-wing Trade Union Federation of Free Workers, the left-wing United Workers Federation, the Committee for the Defense of Consumers and student and teacher organizations. According to the IMF agreements, the administration of Carlos Flores must sell off water, electricity and telephone public utilities. Also facing the same fate are the country's ports and railroads.

## Chiquita Banana lays off 2,000 rural workers in Honduras

The US-based Chiquita Banana Co. announced the layoff of 2,000 rural workers in Honduras last week. The company claims that there exists a worldwide surplus of the fruit. The sacked workers are employed by the Tela Railroad Company, a Chiquita subsidiary. Honduras has yet to recover from the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, after which many thousands of rural workers were also summarily dismissed. The UN has warned that some rural areas now face famine. Union leader Gabriel Beteta said that the banana workers union will not oppose the layoffs. Tela will be left with only 1,500 workers, down from 35,000 in 1998. In lieu of severance pay, the company will offer the workers plots of land.

## Argentine workers to march against the IMF

The "combative" section of Argentina's Labor Federation (*CGT - combativa*) will lead a march on May 31 against the policies of the International Monetary Fund, whose representatives will be arriving in Buenos Aires. The purpose of their visit is to audit the federal budget and to observe how the De la Rúa administration is implementing IMF-mandated economic policies. De la Rúa is expected to announce cutbacks in the nation's budget on May 29. These measures will include pay cuts for public employees and the privatization of many social services.

## Bolivian pilots launch one-day strike

A strike by Bolivian pilots left thousands of passengers stranded Tuesday, with all domestic and many international flights canceled. The National Pilots Association called the 24-hour strike on the basis of a nationalist opposition to the entrance of Brazilian-Paraguayan TAM airline into the Bolivian market. Alfonso Gamarra, head of the association, said the entrance of the new airline will precipitate a crisis that could lead to the bankruptcy of the two airlines currently operating in the country—Lloyd Aereo Boliviano (LAB) and Aerosur. The government, which is promoting an "open sky" policy to lower air fares and bring in foreign investment, declared the pilots strike illegal.

## Mexican students call for a week of solidarity

Mexican students are organizing a solidarity conference June 19-23 as part of their campaign to defend public education. They are proposing the creation of an international student network to defend education in every

country. On the last day of the conference, rallies are expected to take place across the Latin American subcontinent. Among the proposals to be discussed are strategies for the defense of free public education and the release of the eight National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) strike leaders. They are also demanding that the Mexican government's budget assign 12 percent of the GNP to education.

Meanwhile the General Strike Committee (CGH) at UNAM broke off negotiations with university officials May 23, calling the discussions a farce. At a stormy meeting with university negotiators, a parents group took over the microphone to demand the release of the eight jailed students and the cancellation of trials against 200 other strikers. Members of the National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) also declared their support for the students. For the last 12 months the students have been campaigning to defend the right to public education in Mexico. Last Easter, police broke up a 10-month occupation of the UNAM campus led by the CGH. At the conclusion of the meeting, the CGH announced that it would not participate in any more negotiations.

## Peruvian protests against Fujimori

On May 25, 3,000 youth and workers protested in the southern city of Tacna against the Peruvian government of Alberto Fujimori. The demonstrators demanded that the government suspend this past Sunday's elections, saying that its guarantees of a "clean election" were a sham. The marchers carried signs repudiating the election and denouncing Fujimori as a dictator.

## Transportation stoppage in El Salvador

Urban transport owners in El Salvador conducted a four-hour stoppage on May 22 to press President Francisco Flores for fuel subsidies and credit access for equipment purchases. The stoppage was total in the capital of San Salvador, where the owners blocked several avenues.

## Third attempt by machinists union to organize Mesaba Airlines ground workers

Ground workers at Mesaba Airlines began to receive union representation ballots last week as the International Association of Machinists (IAM) launched its third attempt to organize the 970 workers at airports in Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul and other outlying Midwest locations. Mesaba, a regional carrier for Northwest Airlines, recently posted a net income of \$31 million based on sales of \$403 million. It pays its baggage handlers, ramp workers and customer service agents a starting base pay of \$7.65 an hour. Top pay is \$11.85 an hour after 10 years of service.

The past failures of the IAM to win certification indicate a lack of confidence in the union on the part of Mesaba ground workers. The dumping of the IAM by more than 10,000 mechanics at Northwest Airlines during the same period that the IAM has tried to recruit Mesaba's workers cannot have failed to leave a low opinion of the union.

## Texas defense workers authorize strike

Members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at Bell Helicopter Textron in Fort Worth, Texas, voted 748 to 16 to grant strike authorization against the defense contractor if a satisfactory contract cannot be reached before a June 11 deadline. Bell angered workers after it decided to move the assembly of the V-22 Osprey out of the Fort Worth plant and locate production in Amarillo. Bell has maintained operations in Fort Worth

since 1950.

### **Massachusetts warehouse workers end strike against company's tampering with benefits**

Workers at a Methuen, Massachusetts produce warehouse returned to work May 26 after one day on strike. Over 450 members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union struck the warehouse after the company tried to unilaterally alter the health benefits package. The warehouse is the only supplier of perishable foods to 169 Shaw's and Star markets serving Massachusetts and New Hampshire. No details were released concerning the settlement.

### **Boeing union head drops plans to give himself huge salary hike**

The executive director of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), which represents some 20,000 technical and engineering workers at Boeing in the Seattle area, relinquished a \$25,000 raise after it caused a stir throughout the union's ranks. The raise was promised to SPEEA head Charles Bofferding in return for getting Boeing to agree to an agency fee that would deduct dues from all workers, whether they joined the union or not. Currently some 66 percent of the 20,000 members of the SPEEA bargaining unit pay union dues. But many SPEEA members reacted strongly against the payoff, after participating in a 40-day strike—which achieved minimal gains—while having to sustain themselves using their personal savings.

Nevertheless, Bofferding still pocketed a 7 percent raise that will boost his salary from \$127,890 to about \$136,840. AFL-CIO union officials have also given him a bonus check worth \$2,500. SPEEA recently affiliated with the AFL-CIO, and its membership will pay a per capita tax to the labor federation. Bofferding now says he won't cash the check.

New grounds of struggle for dues paying members have opened up at Boeing between SPEEA and the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Both unions are fighting over who should represent some 15,000 Boeing workers involved in data entry, information technology, computing, materials management and other job categories. The IAM filed a claim last month with the AFL-CIO, insisting they be the sole union alternative on the ballot when Boeing non-technical and clerical workers vote for representation. The IAM insists they have worked longer to recruit the potential bargaining unit while SPEEA insists that their white-collar union charter gives them jurisdiction.

### **New organization prepares ground for unionizing “contingent workers”**

The AFL-CIO is supporting a new organization called the National Alliance for Fair Employment. The organization is calling attention to the exploitation of temporary, clerical, part-time and adjunct workers who are systematically underpaid and denied benefits. These so-called contingent workers include part-time college professors, teaching assistants, office clerical-staff workers and other workers who go through temporary agencies. The new umbrella organization has member organizations in 19 US states and in Canada.

The National Alliance for Fair Employment argues that contingent workers make up some 30 percent of the workforce, while an employers' group for temporary agencies claims it comprises only 5 percent. The workers suffer from lower pay as well as racial and gender discrimination. One adjunct college professor testified that he was paid \$12,000 a year with no medical benefits for teaching two classes per semester at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Full professors who taught three classes per semester earned \$40,000 or above and received health benefits.

At a rally last week in the state of Washington, Philip Gaines told about his experience as a “permatemp”—a permanent temporary worker—at Microsoft. For 14 months, Gaines has worked on web site editing for Microsoft, earning \$34,000 during the past year. He said his salary was not enough to pay for health insurance for his family of three. But instead of being made a full-time employee, Gaines will be out of a job July 1 because of a recently implemented Microsoft policy that limits how long

temporary workers can hold the same position.

### **Alberta strikers hit with punitive fine**

With the settlement of the strike by 10,000 health care workers in Alberta after only two days last week, the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE) has been fined \$400,000 by the Court of Queen's Bench under contempt of court charges. Despite the disproportionate size of the fine, the Tory government of Alberta has come under sharp attack for the leniency of the sentence from both the judge hearing the case and from the media. Practical nurses, support staff and others walked off the job May 24 in defiance of anti-strike laws and a court order handed down hours before. Workers won modest wage improvements and job security after a decade of job losses and wage rollbacks that have crippled the publicly funded health care system in the province. The strike carried potentially explosive consequences in the fight against privatization of health care in Alberta. The provincial government's privatization plans, contained in the recently passed Bill 11, have provoked widespread opposition.

The judge in the case, Mr. Justice Erik Lefsrud, sharply denounced lawyers of government health employers for not demanding a jail sentence for AUBE President Dan MacLennan. The judge said that he was inclined to send MacLennan to prison regardless. Lefsrud nevertheless felt compelled to congratulate the union for winning wage gains, which he said they deserved. He went on to add that he thought the fine of \$400,000 plus legal costs was too low and that the sentence would invite other unions to flaunt legal judgments. Similar views have appeared in the popular press, most notably in the *National Post*, the national daily of Conrad Black, who has been conducting a union-busting campaign against workers at the *Calgary Herald*.

Over the course of the last week, nothing but kind words were exchanged between union officials and Alberta Premier Ralph Klein. The union officials are appealing for leniency as payment for the valuable service they provided Klein in defusing public opposition to the government's push to privatize health care.

### **Canadian Auto Workers office staff on strike**

The 92 administrative workers at the offices of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) went on strike last week for pension benefits closer to those of their bosses, the CAW staff representatives. The support staff workers are members of the Office and Professional Employees International Union.

Bob Dury, spokesman for the mostly female workforce, has said that pensions are the only issue in the dispute, while pointing to the fact that senior union officials earn nearly twice as much as the strikers. The support staff, who do administrative and secretarial work, earn about \$42,000 a year as compared to \$75,000 to \$80,000 by CAW representatives. The CAW has offered the strikers the same pension benefits as CAW members. However, the CAW has refused to give them the same plan as union officials or even the reduced benefits recently given to union staff at the Big Three automakers.

Talks broke down over a week ago and Dury says that the CAW have refused to resume talks. "When you have an organization like the CAW that believes they are better than everybody else and whatever they say we have to accept, it's not right." CAW President Buzz Hargrove has said, "We can't budge.... This is just about more."



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