

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 June 2000

Thousands of regional teachers protest in Mexico City

Thousands of protesting teachers from the impoverished southern Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Michoacan and Guerrero, demanding decent wages, have maintained a tent encampment in Mexico City for three weeks. Representatives of Ernesto Zedillo's government are saying teachers' salaries are a state matter and have refused to deal with the teachers' demands.

The teachers are members of the CNTE, the National Coordinating Organization of Education, the national teachers union. A separate organization, the SNTE (the National Education Union), which organizes the teachers in Mexico City, so far has refrained from joining the protest but has helped to feed the protesters.

Mexican government blocks Aeromexico strike

Last Thursday, June 1, the government of Ernesto Zedillo intervened to prevent a strike at Aeromexico, Mexico's largest airline. The baggage handlers union had begun a strike at midnight the previous day after negotiations broke down with the company over wages and benefits. The government took advantage of laws that allow it to take over the management of a corporation and forbid strikes. Aeromexico operates 310 flights daily and another 650 flights in conjunction with other airlines, such as Delta, Air France and Korean Airlines. It serves 43 Mexican cities and 80 in the US and Canada.

The leader of the baggage handlers, Alejandra Barrales, declared that even though he had opposed the government measure, the union sent its 1,500 members back to work fearing that they would lose their jobs. The baggage handlers are asking for a 25 percent wage increase. They also want the company to carry out its commitments from the 1998 contract that involve retirement and child care benefits.

Argentine workers call a national strike against economic plan

Leaders of the Argentine General Labor Federation (CGT) declared their plans to organize a national strike against the second economic adjustment plan of President Fernando De la Rúa.

CGT General Secretary Rodolfo Daer said that the "adjustment" imposes a cut in state expenditures and will include layoffs and pay cuts. He also said that he feared that social benefits will be slashed, a move that would affect millions of Argentine workers.

Daer belongs to the more conciliatory wing of the CGT. The more radical wing, led by Hugo Moyano, has already endorsed a national strike. Moyano's group led protests last Wednesday against the government plan.

De la Rúa's budget calls for 12 percent salary cuts for workers earning over \$1,000 a month and 16 percent cuts for workers earning over \$6,500. The measure affects a significant percentage of state employees. The cost of living in Argentina's capital Buenos Aires is among the highest in the world. The new plan will also mean cuts in health, education and other social programs.

The second "adjustment" comes on the heels of the first, which imposed a \$1.4 billion cut in social spending. The International Monetary Fund is pressuring for a \$4.5 billion cut.

Popular reaction against economic measures in Ecuador

On May 29, 140,000 teachers entered the third week of their strike against the Ecuadorian government's privatization of education. They are objecting to control being given over to the municipalities as the first step in the privatization process. Union leaders say the government's proposed 66 percent raise is inadequate because it applies only to base pay, which is a fraction of what teachers actually get paid. The teachers are asking for a monthly salary of \$100.

Mass mobilizations in Ecuador against fuel price increases

Ecuador's Coordinating Committee of Social Movements announced that protests are imminent against the "terrible measures that are being imposed on the people." The government of Gustavo Noboa has increased fuel prices by 80 percent, which will immediately affect transportation fees. Utility rates will increase according to a sliding scale, ranging from 5 to 300 percent. Aware of the explosive social character of these measures, the government has raised some wages. However, the Coordinating Committee considers them not enough to compensate for the increases. The opening up of Ecuador's economy and dollarization of its currency will cause prices to rise inexorably to US levels while wages stagnate.

Half of all Guatemalans earn less than \$2 a day

A report on poverty in Guatemala states that 64 percent of all Guatemalans earn less than \$2 a day. The Independent Association of Social Inquiry and Research (Asociacion Independiente de Investigacion y Estudios Sociales), a Guatemalan organization, produced the report issued May 29. Among rural workers 76 percent are unable to bring home even that paltry sum. Among Indians, the percentage is 82 percent. By international standards these individuals are at the lowest levels of poverty, unable to provide for themselves the necessary caloric intake for survival. In addition, there is no social safety net to help the poor or funds for education and health care.

Actors rally as strike enters second month

Actors in the Los Angeles area held a rally May 31 as their nationwide strike against the advertising industry crossed the one-month mark. Some 500 actors in Westwood picketed Sprint's corporate offices and held demonstrations in front of the ad agencies of Leo Burnett and BBD&O.

Screen Actors Guild (SAG) President William Daniels, along with former presidents Ed Asner and William Schallert, addressed the rally. SAG and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA) represent 135,000 striking actors from coast to coast. Union officials announced that a meeting with management would take place in New York on June 13-14 as the result of federal mediation, but that it was only an "exploratory" meeting to see if there were grounds to resume bargaining.

The ad industry has made clear it is prepared to hold out for a considerable period unless the unions grant concessions, particularly on the 50-year-old "pay per play" wage formula which provides actors with residuals each time an ad airs on network TV. The industry is

seeking a more profitable formula, which will substitute a flat fee covering only the shooting of a commercial, similar to the present formula, which governs cable TV and the Internet. The unions have called for the protection of the "pay per play" formula, and its extension to cable and the Internet. While militant picketing has curtailed the shooting of some commercials, a number of ad agencies have used nonunion actors in the US and abroad to undermine the strike.

Seattle janitors rally for wage and benefit improvements

Seattle janitors held a rally last week to make known their demands for wage and benefit increases as negotiations move toward a July 1 contract expiration. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 6, which represents 2,000 unionized janitors in the King County area, has submitted demands for a \$1 an hour wage increase, four weeks of vacation a year and workload reductions.

Presently, wages for downtown janitors start at \$7.45 an hour and rise to \$10.05 an hour, while suburban janitors earn a mere \$8.60 an hour. These wages have remained stagnant over the years while the cost of living in the Seattle area has skyrocketed. But the building maintenance industry is indifferent to the plight of its janitors and has yet to make an offer to the union.

At the rally the SEIU leadership made known to the membership that management will strongly resist their demands. In a series of contract struggles, including the recent strike by Los Angeles janitors, the SEIU agreed to settlements that fell far short of workers' demands.

Boston teachers to take strike vote

The Boston School Teachers Union announced they will hold a vote at their June 14 membership meeting that will commit them to strike if an acceptable contract is not in place by August 31—the expiration date of their current agreement with the Boston Education Department.

While the union has held such votes in the past, this is the earliest use of the tactic and is aimed at conveying to the school administration and its backers that teachers are strongly opposed to attempts at rolling back seniority rights and other past gains.

Department officials are driving to end a policy that currently allows teachers whose jobs have been eliminated, or those who are returning from leaves of absence, to apply for jobs at three schools and be guaranteed a position at one. The department also wants to abolish the right of a teacher with "permanent" status to apply for jobs held by provisional teachers. Provisional teachers presently attain permanent status after three years.

Union seeks to represent Boeing workers in Texas

Over 200 professional and technical workers at Boeing's Corinth, Texas plant cast ballots to determine if they want the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) as their bargaining agent. Boeing has campaigned hard against the organizing drive. SPEEA executive director Charles Bofferding expressed pessimism that the union will overcome intimidation from management. "It's frankly unusual to win one of these on the first attempt," Bofferding said. "The company has dug deep into its anti-union campaign."

The election will also decide whether the professional and technical workers will form separate or one unified bargaining unit. The Corinth plant is one of a series of campaigns that SPEEA has launched to widen its membership at Boeing in the wake of its 40-day strike against the aerospace giant. On June 29, 4,200 workers at Boeing's Wichita complex will cast ballots.

Cape Breton miners strike, called off by UMWA, yields paltry gains

The strike by Cape Breton coal miners last January was brought to an end after two weeks when their union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), brought promises of a government review of retirement provisions for workers displaced by the shutdown of operations at two mines. The announcement of that deal last week has revealed those assurances to be little more than a tactical maneuver to defuse the potentially explosive strike.

The wildcat strike by 1,600 miners was staged by workers angered over plans to close down mining operations of the government-owned Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco), a move that would throw hundreds out of work. The union leadership had convinced workers to accept negotiations with government over the deal, but no agreement was reached in those talks last spring. Further mediation was also unsuccessful, leading Labour Minister Claudette Bradshaw to send the dispute to binding arbitration.

The company had offered pensions for only those workers with 25 years experience, leaving the majority with only lump-sum severance packages. The new deal, handed down by arbitrator Bruce Outhouse, will add \$40 million to the \$111 million already committed to extend pensions to workers under age 50 with 25 years of service who were not previously covered, but still excludes all those with fewer years on the job. Outhouse said he is "keenly aware" that employees with between 20 and 25 years' service will be disappointed, but including them would cost \$79 million.

The government is planning to get out of the mining business in Cape Breton, where Devco has lost billions over several years of operation. Hundreds of workers have already been laid off at the two closed mines and the government has refused to offer job guarantees at the remaining Prince mine after it is sold to a new employer later this year. According to Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale, "I'm not in a position, nor should I be, on behalf of the government of Canada to wade into a commercial negotiating process."

Toronto truckers strike halts new construction

Six hundred fifty unionized concrete truck drivers have been on strike since April 17 and both industrial and housing construction have, as a result, virtually ground to a halt. The strike affects all construction in Toronto as well as adjoining municipalities.

The main issue in the dispute involving concrete companies and members of Teamsters Local 230 is pay equity due to a wage grid which rewards drivers according to how long they have worked for the same employer. Companies are reportedly insisting on maintaining the wage differentials provided in the grid and have offered a 2.7 percent wage increase in each year of the five-year contract.

The strike comes in the middle of a housing boom in Toronto which saw new home starts rise to near record levels this spring. Talks in the dispute have been on and off and few details of the negotiations have been revealed by either party.



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