

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 June 2000

## 48-hour strike against economic policies in Ecuador

On June 15 and 16, the Coordinating Organization of Social Movements launched a two-day strike against the policies of Ecuadorian President Gustavo Noboa. The strike signals a new wave of mass protests and partially paralyzed economic activity throughout the nation. Among the protesters were medical doctors (who struck for 72 hours), 140,000 teachers, oil and electrical workers, plus Indians from evangelical associations. On Friday, Interior Minister Antonio Andretta called for a dialog, requesting that violence be avoided. The day before four protesters had been injured and a bus burnt.

## 100,000 Bolivians demand new university

On June 13, 100,000 *alteños* (citizens of the city of El Alto) marched into the Bolivian capital of La Paz to demand a new university. El Alto students and their families rallied in front of the government building. One leader said that this struggle was symbolic of every government's inattention to El Alto's needs. The protesters also demanded the construction of a hospital, that the government share toll road revenues with the cities, and the building of a stadium. They declared their intent to follow up with a hunger strike if the government did not respond to their demands.

## Protests continue in Argentina

Argentine state workers mobilized in the Central Plaza de Mayo Square on June 14 against the economic policies proposed by President De la Rúa. It was part of a weeklong series of demonstrations. On June 13, workers at state banks and health services went on strike.

## Workers in Venezuela protest

On June 15 thousands of Venezuelan workers protested to demand that the economy be improved and that they be given a 20 percent raise, promised by President Hugo Chavez 18 months ago. The government chose to ignore the demands, according to the head of the Labor Ministry Lino Martínez, who described the mobilization as a political ploy to discredit President Chavez.

Meanwhile, hundreds of survivors from heavy rains, flooding and mudslides six months ago in the country's coastal region rallied in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas on June 15 to demand help from the Chavez government. Thousands were made homeless by the rain damage, which also injured and killed many residents. The survivors arrived in buses, trucks and private vehicles to the Congressional Palace. At the rally, speakers pointed out that international aid funds delivered to the central government have yet to be sent to the needy.

## Arrests continue in Vieques

The US Marine Corps has continued arresting protesters in Vieques, Puerto Rico. On June 17 about 37 people were arrested

who were protesting the Marine presence and demanding the cancellation of military exercises. Among the arrested, most of whom are still detained, are teachers and union representatives.

## Attempt to restart negotiations in actors strike fails

Screen Actors Guild (SAG) President William Daniels announced that an attempt by federal mediators to restart talks failed in the month-and-a-half-old strike by 135,000 commercial actors. "Unfortunately, we are not close. We're really at the same point we were when we started the negotiations here in New York in February. I've always said that this was going to be a long strike." Daniels also asserted that advertisers "are trying to break our unions." Both Daniels and his counterpart for the ad agencies, John McGuinn, admitted that mediators would not contact the two sides for renewed negotiations for a period of several weeks.

Members of SAG and the American Federation of Radio and Television Actors (AFTRA) struck the advertising industry May 1 over the demand by agencies to roll back a longtime wage formula in commercial television. Actors are currently compensated each time a commercial airs on network television in a formula known as pay per play. The ad agencies want to give actors a flat fee for commercials, a system they now use on cable TV. The unions, in contrast, want the pay per play formula extended to cable and the Internet.

The seriousness of the strike has rallied many Hollywood celebrities to the side of the strikers, such as Richard Dreyfuss, Dick Cavett, Elliott Gould, Harry Hamlin, Susan Sarandon and Lauren Bacall. The unions have attempted to firm up the strike by setting up regional "trial boards" around the country that will deal with union members who cross picket lines. SAG members such as football stars Kurt Warner and Terrell Davis may be thrown out of the union. The two ignored appeals from strikers and crossed picket lines the previous week to shoot an ad for Campbell's Soup at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

The unions are also opening membership up to nonunion actors in an attempt to deny the advertising companies this strikebreaking source. Nonunion actors can put in 80 hours picketing, manning phone banks or other strike-related activities as a way of qualifying for membership. The tactic immediately attracted 1,200 applicants in the Los Angeles area, basically drying up that source for advertisers.

## Minneapolis hotel workers strike

Hotel workers at the Thunderbird Hotel in a Minneapolis, Minnesota suburb walked off the job June 17, just one day after employees at the Radisson South Hotel launched a strike for higher wages and benefits. The stoppage came after contract talks between nine major hotels in Minneapolis and Bloomington and union officials for 1,500 members of the Hotel Employees and

Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 17 broke down.

Hotel workers are demanding wage increases of 21 to 46 percent along with pension and benefit increases. Initially the hotel industry offered 12 to 15 percent wage increases over five years. But workers rejected that offer by a 94 percent margin back on June 8. Management returned with a proposal for increases of 18 to 25 percent. But when the union pressed for increased benefits the hotel negotiators reshuffled the package by trimming the wage proposal to a range of 17.5 to 23 percent over the five-year contract in order to boost the health and pension package, something which the union rejected.

Union officials plan on gradually spreading the strike to the other hotels over the next two weeks as convention business picks up. A third hotel was to be called out later in the day on June 17, but the union dropped the proposal. Overall, Local 17 represents 5,500 workers in the hotel and restaurant industry. About 30 percent of the union are natives of other countries and 80 percent of the house cleaners are foreign nationals, statistics that reflect a clear strategy by the hotel industry to profit by exploiting low-wage labor.

### **Denver and Seattle janitors rally**

Denver janitors rallied June 15 to demand higher wages and health benefits in the first protests leading up to the opening of contract talks in August. Some 2,000 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 105, two-thirds of them women, will be affected by the contract. Janitors toiled for an average \$6.50 an hour under the previous contract negotiated in 1996. A majority do not receive health benefits and many are barred from working more than five or six hours a night.

Janitors in the Seattle area also rallied. Union officials of SEIU Local 6 and negotiators for the building maintenance industry in Seattle concluded their third negotiating session. Management has yet to put a wage proposal on the table in discussions over the contract covering 1,800 janitors and managers. Presently janitors make between \$7.45 and \$10.05 an hour. The union has proposed raises of \$1 an hour for each year of a three-year agreement.

### **Teamsters strike Pepsi bottling plant in Minnesota**

Over 400 Teamsters struck a Pepsi bottling plant June 12 in Burnsville, Minnesota over pensions, health insurance, wages and the destruction of jobs. Pepsi offered a mere 2.9 percent wage increase per year over a three-year contract and made no provisions for an increase in company contributions to health care. Union members rejected the company offer by a 364 to 14 margin.

Workers presently pay \$40 per week toward insurance costs and fear Pepsi may continue to increase employees' portion of the package. "It may hurt us in the wallet for a bit," a 25-year veteran told the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* newspaper. "But at the same time, we've got to take a stand." Workers are seeking a pension plan with a provision to retire before age 62 without penalties. The grueling work for delivery drivers often results in injuries that don't permit them to reach retirement.

Pepsi Bottling Group based in Somers, New York owns the Burnsville Pepsi plant. The company operates 70 plants in North America and is the largest bottler of the popular soft drink in the world. Market data indicates that Pepsi's sales along with other carbonated drinks slowed down in 1999 due to increased competition from other beverages, including bottled water.

### **Doctors strike in British Columbia**

A strike by doctors in the central British Columbia town of Prince George continues to escalate since 25 surgeons and anesthetists at the Prince George Regional hospital withdrew their services June 15. Mediation in the dispute began Monday, June 19, but the longstanding problems of understaffing and lack of resources are expected to persist regardless of the outcome.

Medical care in this town of 75,000, like more remote centers everywhere, has been in steady decline in recent years, with many health care professionals leaving for larger cities where funding cuts have not been as acutely felt. The Northern Medical Society, representing doctors, is at odds with the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) Health Ministry over proposed funding for their area. Doctors have presented a nine-point plan asking for incentives to attract and maintain a greater number of health professionals to alleviate what has been acknowledged as intolerable workloads and working conditions. The plan is estimated to cost up to 50 percent more than what has been made available from the province.

All but emergency medical services at the hospital have been suspended and as many as 60 family doctors have threatened to join the strike. In addition other specialists such as psychiatrists and pediatricians could join the walkout if the dispute is not resolved soon.

### **Timber strike threatened in British Columbia**

A strike vote of over 90 percent has set the stage for a possible strike in the southern logging region of coastal BC. Early this month, nearly 12,000 members of the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers union (IWA) voted for strike action if a deal cannot be reached with the region's timber producers. No talks have been held since the vote.

While the union has not yet sought a strike mandate with producers in renegotiations for the contract that expired June 15, a vote by another 5,000 members of the union in the southern interior is expected to yield similar results this week. Their contract, as well as others in the region, expires at the end of the month. Workers are fighting against concessions sought by employers for contract "flexibility" in exchange for increased wage and benefit provisions.

BC is Canada's largest lumber exporting province, with most recent figures showing foreign sales of over \$9 billion a year, mostly to the US. The IWA, which represents nearly 30,000 workers in British Columbia, last staged a major strike in the province in 1986.



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