

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 June 2000

## Mexican police attack workers

According to the Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR) and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, Mexican police repressed an attempt by maquiladora workers to defend their trade union rights. The incident occurred in the City of Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. The workers went on strike against Duro, a US-based company that produces paper products for Hallmark.

On June 18, the workers raised strike banners with the objective of establishing their own union. In the pre-dawn hours of the next day, 13 police patrols arrived at the factory, surprising the workers gathered in the streets guarding the strike. Police then attempted to intimidate the workers by cocking their weapons and insisting that the workers leave. When the workers did not withdraw, the police attacked them.

Five workers were beaten, four of them women. One of the injured women, who was eight months pregnant, has been hospitalized. An international observer who was present at the scene was detained for interrogation.

The majority of the Duro workers are now camped out in front of the Rio Bravo City Hall, demanding that their fellow workers be released and their union recognized.

Among the ill-founded charges which Duro management is pursuing, the most serious may be kidnapping, based on the contention that security guards and the plant manager were inside the plant when workers hung strike banners on the gates of the plant.

Independent reports indicate unsafe and miserable working conditions. Workers were applying glue without protective equipment or ventilation within the manufacturing facility. The rate of miscarriages among female workers was high. More than a dozen workers have lost fingers from machinery lacking adequate protective guards. Wages average about \$40 a week.

The workers are insisting on their constitutionally guaranteed right to a union. They are also demanding safe working conditions, freedom from compulsory overtime and to be safe from emotional abuse, threats, acts of violence and sexual harassment.

They are also demanding medical attention inside the plant, life insurance for the families of workers who die on the job, bathroom breaks, fans or air conditioning and improved food service. Workers have complained about the mandatory cafeteria program which has served food containing mouse feces, hair and cockroaches.

## Santo Domingo forces kill Haitian immigrants

On June 18, a military patrol fired on a vehicle carrying undocumented Haitian immigrants that were crossing the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Six Haitians were killed, along with their Dominican driver. Fifteen others were wounded.

Thousands of Haitians cross the border every year into the Dominican Republic seeking jobs and food. Haiti is the poorest country in the hemisphere, with many living in conditions of chronic malnutrition. Hundreds die every day of starvation.

## Ecuadorian teachers strike

On June 18, representatives of the National Educators Union (UNE) of Ecuador initiated negotiations with the government to find a solution to a teachers strike that is already in its seventh week. The teachers have been

fighting for wages of \$100 a month minimum and against the privatization of education.

On June 21, UNE President Aracelly Moreno was arrested for allegedly "slandering" the government of President Gustavo Noboa. Moreno had said that the government was using police repression against the teachers. Administration Secretary Marcelo Santos denied that the arrest had anything to do with the strike. He referred to the arrest as a sign that "things are changing and disorder will not prevail in the country."

Before being taken into custody Moreno announced that the teachers will resort to a hunger strike. The teachers vowed to press their demands and continue until Moreno and other UNE leaders are released.

Police broke up a march of 5,000 teachers through Quito. On the same day, doctors began an indefinite strike, demanding a basic wage of \$300 per month to compensate for the effects of the dollarization of the economy. Public health doctors earn between \$35 and \$120 a month.

## National strike in Paraguay

Major Paraguayan unions initiated a series of strikes on June 22, affecting 14 of the 19 departments of the country. The 48-hour strike was a protest against President Gonzales Macchi's economic privatization policies. Polls say that 90 percent of Paraguayans oppose Macchi's sale of government enterprises to foreign and domestic capitalists.

The capital city of Asuncion was a city under siege during the two days, with street battles erupting between demonstrators and police. On the first day, at least 15 protesters were wounded, and 12 people were arrested. The fighting continued on the second day, with 18 wounded and 11 arrests.

Macchi has announced plans to quicken the pace of privatizations. The unions are most opposed to the sale of the Antelco phone company, the water utility Corposana, and Paraguay's only railroad. A spokesperson for the Paraguayan Union Federation (CUT) explained that out of the 145,000 workers affected, 15,000 would be laid off if the privatizations occur. Twenty-four hours before Thursday's strike, employees of the companies to be privatized initiated a week-long strike.

## Mexican police violence against teachers

About 500 Public Security police violently ended an occupation of two buildings of the Education Ministry in the city of Villahermosa, capital of Tabasco state on the Southeast Mexican coast.

On June 21 the teachers began occupying the buildings and also blocking two of the busiest avenues in Villahermosa. During the attack, several teachers were beaten and 85 were arrested.

In the central Mexican state of Hidalgo, northwest of Mexico City, teachers have been on strike for over a month. They are also blocking the highway between the city of Pachuca, capital of Hidalgo, and Mexico City.

## Uruguayan students defend education

Hundreds of high school and college students marched in Montevideo, capital of Uruguay, under the banner, "For an education, by and for everyone." The march rallied at the Artigas Institute, the principal teaching college in Montevideo.

The students are raising the education issue as the government debates the education budget for next year. A student leader explained that they oppose the attempt to modify education in Uruguay to suit the needs of

international capitalists and the global market place. The students are demanding that 6 percent of Uruguay's Gross Domestic Product be devoted to education, as recommended by the United Nations.

Many students also denounced the poor state of the teaching colleges that leak during rains and lack library facilities and places to study.

During the protest, teachers at the Artigas Institute struck in solidarity, with many joining the march. The professors said that they have not been paid due to administrative problems, and they are only getting between 50 and 60 percent of their normal salaries.

#### **Argentine bus drivers strike**

Inter-city bus drivers began an indefinite strike in Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital city, on June 23. They are demanding back pay and the rehiring of 400 laid-off drivers by *La Internacional* bus company. The drivers, members of the Union of Automotive Transporters (UTA), had not been paid for three months, from March to May.

Bus transportation out of the *Retiro* terminal in Buenos Aires was paralyzed because of the total support from the drivers of 140 other companies that operate out of that terminal.

#### **Government agency files suit against harassment of undocumented workers**

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has filed a lawsuit on behalf of 27 undocumented women workers against an Arizona lithography company charging they were strip-searched, groped and the subject of racist slurs.

The suit seeks an injunction against Quality Art to end the discrimination against the Mexican and Guatemalan women while calling for financial penalties and back pay for workers who were fired or quit due to the harassment or intimidation. The workers charge they were strip-searched and that a supervisor groped or improperly touched them on a regular basis. They were denied holiday pay and told they had no rights in the United States because they were not citizens.

Despite being undocumented, foreign workers are, from a legal standpoint, protected from abusive treatment by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Arizona incident gives only a glimpse of the brutal exploitation of undocumented workers in the United States.

#### **Minneapolis hotel strike continues**

More than 1,000 hotel workers are manning the picket lines at five hotels in Minneapolis and its Bloomington suburb as the strike by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 17 continues through its second week.

The pent-up frustrations of workers were visible when workers walked off the job at the Hilton in downtown Minneapolis, the state's largest hotel. When a general manager brought out a cart filled with ice and refreshments strikers pushed the cart back, saying they preferred better pay. Minneapolis police were called out when women strikers blocked hotel entrances and threw themselves on cars while waving picket signs and shouting.

The hotel industry has thrived on maintaining low pay through the exploitation of cheap immigrant labor, and the situation in Minneapolis is no different. Union members who make up Local 17 speak some 17 different languages. The strike has received strong support from taxi drivers who are refusing to cross picket lines. Taxi drivers, like hotel workers, are another worker group that is comprised of large numbers of immigrants.

It is not clear whether the union will spread the strike to the remaining four hotels. The conflict is reaching a critical point with the opening of the 50,000-strong Alcoholics Anonymous convention June 28, but hotel management is showing no signs that they are prepared to give in to the workers' demands for an end to poverty wages. They are refusing to enter into new talks until the union reduces their demands. Minneapolis mayor Sharon Sayles-Belton, a Democrat, became involved in the final talks before the strike broke out. Since then, she has gone on vacation.

Local 17 is demanding pay increases of 21 to 46 percent, with the larger increases shifted towards the lower end of the pay spectrum, which starts at \$7.40 an hour. The hotel employers are offering only 17½ to 23 percent over the life of a five-year contract. Benefits are also an issue, as management is only agreeing to increase benefits at the cost of pay.

#### **Tentative agreement at New York power utility**

Consolidated Edison and the Utility Workers of America Local 1-2 reached a tentative agreement that narrowly averted a strike by 10,000 workers who provide power maintenance for New York City and suburban Westchester County.

The two sides agreed to resume negotiations a few minutes before midnight June 25 when the old agreement expired. No details were made available concerning the tentative proposal that came after four hours of early morning bargaining. Both the company and labor bureaucracy are touting the agreement prior to ratification by the rank and file. Con Edison management said the agreement was "fair" to workers while a union spokesman called it a "win-win situation." The issues, which had separated the two sides going into the final hours of bargaining, involved sick time, job security, pensions and medical benefits.

#### **Minnesota workers continue Pepsi strike**

The strike by 400 members of Teamsters Local 792 against the Pepsi bottling plant in Burnsville, Minnesota is entering its third week without resolution. Recent talks have been limited to mere conversations between Local 792 secretary-treasurer Larry Yoswa and Pepsi's chief negotiator.

The union, whose wages average around \$15 an hour, has been pressing for 4 percent raises in each year of a new three-year contract while the Pepsi Bottling Group is holding to their last offer of a 2.7 percent increase. Other critical issues include early retirement and the need for greater company contributions to health insurance. The company is also attempting to take away the delivery of fountain products from union drivers, who receive a commission on the products.

Pepsi Bottling Group is Pepsi's largest bottler and operates 70 plants in North America. The company has drawn forces from throughout its network of companies to help deliver products during the strike.

#### **Court rules airline weight restrictions on female flight attendants discriminatory**

The 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that United Airlines discriminated against female flight attendants by imposing more stringent weight limits on women than men. From 1980 to 1994 United's policy required women to weigh 14 to 25 pounds less than men of the same height and age. The employment practice caused female flight attendants to attempt to control their weight by forced diets, diuretics and purging. Those unable to meet the policy's requirements were suspended or fired.

In 1992, 13 women victimized by the policy filed a suit. In a 2-1 decision, the court ruled that "United made no showing that having disproportionately thinner female than male flight attendants bears a relation to flight attendants' ability to greet passengers, push carts, move luggage, and, perhaps most important, provide physical assistance in emergencies."

Up until the 1970's, airlines followed a hiring policy that limited the flight attendant field to women and required them to conform to weight and appearance standards, remain unmarried and childless and retire at age 35. Subsequently, the field was opened to men and United then imposed a new policy that included the weight differentials between men and women.

An earlier case involving United in New York was settled by a group of flight attendants who were reinstated and received back pay. But at the same time the judge ruled the airline's weight policy was not discriminatory. In 1994, United terminated the weight restrictions offered to reinstate flight attendants victimized by the rule. However, the recent suit seeks to address the fact that female flight attendants were never reimbursed for lost pay and pension benefits due to the company's policy.

### **B.C. doctors strike settled amidst further unrest**

After a weeklong battle which saw specialists at central British Columbia's main health center in Prince George withdraw all but emergency care, doctors and provincial negotiators reached an agreement last Thursday. The deal, which provides additional money to bolster the shortage of health professionals in the region, was arrived at just as the strike was scheduled to broaden to include general practitioners and other specialists only hours later.

The strike was called by doctors at the Prince George Regional Hospital in the ongoing fight to maintain adequate staffing at the center which has faced an erosion of funding from the NDP provincial government. At the same time, doctors in other areas of the province who are facing similar problems of reduced funding and increased workloads are gearing up for similar action. Doctors in the town of Kamloops in southern B.C. are threatening strike action to protest the reduction of operating facilities at the local Royal Inland Hospital in August. The mayor of Quesnel in the central interior region has said that the deal with Prince George will deepen the crisis of doctor shortages in his region as more leave for better conditions elsewhere.

The \$10 million government package approved by Prince George doctors represents an increase of nearly \$1 million from the original offer and provides \$5.2 million for recruitment and retention of doctors, \$3.2 million for on-call payments, \$600,000 for medical training and \$1 million for other initiatives.

### **Bombardier workers on strike in Toronto**

Almost 4,000 production and office workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) went on strike last Thursday at Bombardier's de Havilland aerospace plant in Toronto. The main issues in the dispute are pensions and job security.

The plant in Toronto makes the Dash 8 turboprop and Global Express business jet. The strike comes amidst an ongoing dispute involving Bombardier between Canada and Brazil over regional aircraft subsidies. If Brazilian subsidies ruled illegal by the World Trade Organization are resolved it could bring windfall compensation to Bombardier and give them access to markets previously dominated by Brazil.



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