

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 July 2000

Paraguay's government insists on privatizations in spite of national strike

Following a general strike the previous week, Paraguayan President Hugo Banzer insisted that he will continue with his so-called State Reform policy of privatizations. While the 48-hour work stoppage drew widespread support, government economists said that foreign investment would cease if extensive privatizations were not carried out.

Ecuadoran doctors, teachers end their strikes

The Ecuadoran doctors federation signed a deal with the government of Gustavo Noboa, ending a strike by 30,000 doctors that had begun on May 21. The agreement raises base pay from \$30 to \$52 a month, a far cry from the \$300 minimum the doctors had demanded.

The government also promised to raise health expenditures from 2 to 5 percent of the Gross Domestic Product beginning next year.

Another 9,000 public health workers remain on strike, demanding more money for public health clinics and pay raises for the hospital personnel.

Agreement was also reached in a seven-week strike of 140,000 teachers. The settlement took place once National Educators Union President Aracely Moreno and other leaders were released from jail. Moreno had been arrested for allegedly slandering President Noboa.

Under the terms of the agreement Noboa agreed not to pursue privatization plans and not to cut the education budget, which had been dropping every year. Teachers are to receive a wage of \$29 a month, \$71 less than they had asked for.

Mexican peasants commemorate Guerrero massacre

Survivors of the massacre of 17 peasants in Aguas Blancas, in Guerrero state, along with family members of the victims and their supporters, rallied to demand restitution from the Mexican government, payment for continuing medical costs of some of the survivors and the removal of troops from Guerrero. The 17 peasants, all members of the Southern Sierra Peasants Organization (OCSS), were gunned down five years ago on June 28 by the Mexican army. At the time, 15,000 troops occupied Guerrero; today there are more than 60,000 soldiers there.

Mexican teachers arrested

For the second time in less than a month, the Mexican government repressed teachers struggles. Eighty-four primary and secondary school teachers from the southern state of Tabasco were arrested during a demonstration demanding decent living and working conditions and constitutional rights.

On June 5, in an attempt to draw attention to their struggle, they had blocked roads leading to Cardenas, Macuspana, and La Isla. Over 3,000 police were sent in against them, and 30 teachers were arrested. Many more were beaten, including two pregnant teachers, one of whom miscarried.

On June 21, teachers who were peacefully occupying the offices of the education secretary were violently thrown out. Heavily armed anti-riot troops pushed and beat teachers indiscriminately, while forces from the Judicial Police rounded up the leaders.

The 84 arrested teachers have denounced acts of torture by orders of the Mexican Attorney General to make them confess to crimes they did not commit.

Leader of Duro workers missing in Tijuana, Mexico

On June 22, Eliud Almaguer, leader of the striking Duro Bag Manufacturing workers, disappeared while traveling from Rio Bravos in the state of Tamaulipas to the city of Monterrey. He is presumed kidnapped. Other union leaders suspect police involvement, pointing out that the police have lately been detaining union leaders on "orders from above." Almaguer was on his way to a conference in Tijuana of representatives from other maquiladora plants.

On June 28, Duro Bag workers who had been arrested on the picket lines were released on \$2,000 bail, about a year's wages in Mexico. The state government insists that the Duro workers have no rights to their own union since the official union, the Mexican Workers Federation (CTM), is the officially recognized union at the plant. In reality, most maquiladoras have contracts with CTM, whose role is more that of a labor contractor to the employers. The workers have no say in the matter.

A delegation of 32 workers appealing to the governor in Ciudad Victoria was told that the workers' only option was to end their strike and place themselves at the mercy of Duro Bag management, which would decide which workers would be re-employed. They were also told that they should join several CTM locals in Rio Bravo. Furthermore, the government of Tomas Yarrington denies that there has been repression against the workers.

The workers reaffirmed their determination to continue their strike with a march across the city until their independent union was recognized. Two workers also attempted to speak to the mass media about the repression but were intercepted by armed police agents who detained them. The police demanded to know how they had managed to pay their bus fare to Ciudad Victoria to meet with the governor and to Reynosa to meet with the television media.

When the workers demanded their right to be represented by a lawyer, they were released after being threatened with charges of trafficking undocumented workers into the United States. Unable to intimidate the workers, the Tamaulipas authorities and the CTM are now promising that all workers will be rehired, that no charges will be made against the workers and that conditions in the Duro plant will be investigated. The Rio Bravo workers have camped out in the city's main square.

Fatal helicopter crash highlights advertisers' efforts to undermine actors strike

A helicopter crash involved in shooting a commercial ad for Nissan in the Canadian province of British Columbia has focused attention on certain aspects of the ongoing strike by 130,000 actors in the United States. According to early reports, the rotor blade of the helicopter hit the rugged vertical surface of a crevasse over a remote glacier in the northern part of the province. The pilot along with the commercial's director, cameraman and another technician were killed.

The accident is the third helicopter crash involving commercial shoots to occur in British Columbia and the Yukon over the last six years. British Columbia came under further criticism when two Canuck Labrador search and rescue helicopters broke down and the rescue crew had to be flown to the crash site by a US helicopter.

According to HIS Prods., the ad agency hired for the Nissan commercial, the shoot had been arranged before the May 1 strike by the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists and the Screen

Actors Guild. But since the strike began, the production of commercials in western Canada has accelerated. Some commercial work transferred from the US to Canada is being organized secretly and at a fevered pace. From a legal standpoint US crews and actors are required to have permits to work across the border in Canada. And the striking American unions have asked their Canadian counterparts not to perform struck work. However Canadian crews along with studio space are being heavily booked by US ad agencies.

Ad actors in the United States are striking to defeat an attempt by the advertising industry to roll back the pay formula for commercial television that provides for residual fees every time the ad is aired and instead substitute a flat-rate fee. Strikers want the advertisers to accept a similar "pay per play" formula for cable TV and the Internet where flat fees presently exist.

Minneapolis hotel strike ends

Striking Minneapolis and suburban Bloomington hotel workers approved a five-year contract bringing their 13-day strike to an end June 28. The rolling strike ultimately closed down seven of the nine unionized hotels, involving about 1,000 members of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 17.

The final package included wage increases of 20 to 26 percent over the life of a five-year agreement. Originally the union set its goal of winning wage increases of 21 to 46 percent, with the higher figure aimed at raising the wages of the lowest-paid workers who receive a mere \$7.40 an hour. Hotel management countered this offer with a 17 to 23 percent increase.

The union did manage to win a 70 cent per hour increase in company contributions to health care that is supposed to allow workers to obtain insurance for dependants. Workers also received a floating holiday meant to answer the demands by various immigrant groups in the union for time off for days celebrating important cultural events. The profit of the hotel industry rests to a considerable degree on its exploitation of immigrant labor. Some 40 percent of the striking workers are comprised of immigrant groups as various as Somalis, Tibetans and workers from the Balkans.

The business community exerted heavy pressure on the strike as it sought to prevent the labor stoppage from damaging future prospects for making Minneapolis an attractive and profitable site for conventions. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* declared the end to the strike a "good outcome" in its editorial headline. It stated, "On the wage scales, increases won by striking Twin Cities hotel workers appear modest. At the top end, union negotiators succeeded in moving the hotels only 3 percent higher than their original offer. Improvements won in various benefit categories make the package look clearly worth the effort, but it's safe to say these workers will still be scraping by on rather modest incomes."

Tentative agreement between General Electric and its unions

General Electric Co. and its 14 unions reached a tentative agreement June 27, one day after the old contract covering 38,000 employees expired. Three of the unions—the International Union of Electrical Workers, the United Electrical Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers—that represent 28,000 members of the affected bargaining units have endorsed the proposed pact. The three largest unions are scheduled for ratification votes on July 6.

According to an IUE spokesperson the contract contains improvements in wages and pensions while rebuffing company demands to make workers shoulder a greater share of health care expenses. But the spokesperson also indicated that the agreement "vastly strengthens" so-called job preservation committees, labor-management bodies which either try to suppress any protest against layoffs or forestall them by compelling workers to accept higher levels of productivity through speedups or the implementation of new work procedures. The agreement increases the length of time that GE must give prior to a plant closure from six months to one year. This will allow the union more time to

pressure the workforce into accepting the necessary concessions to keep the plant open.

California board opens up loophole in overtime law to aid business

California's Industrial Welfare Commission approved a change in the state's labor law June 30, which will allow businesses to avoid paying overtime to certain workers by reclassifying them as managers. Under the previous law, workers could only be classified as management if they spent more than 50 percent of the time "primarily engaged" in management tasks that include such duties as supervising other employees or compiling records. The new ruling establishes an "occasional standard" that could open a loophole whereby workers who fulfill minimal managerial roles while performing a host of labor functions might be reclassified and denied overtime.

Up until 1988, overtime in California had been defined on a daily basis. But the administration of Republican Governor Pete Wilson altered it to pay overtime only after the completion of 40 hours. When Democratic Governor Gray Davis came into office with the backing of the state AFL-CIO he brought back the daily overtime rule. But Davis also appoints the members of the Industrial Welfare Commission who opened up the new loophole. The Commission's chairman is Bill Dombrowski, president of the California Retailers Association.

Dayton, Ohio teachers union agrees to cost-cutting contract

The Dayton Education Association leadership was able to push through a one-year contract that included no raise and a 30 percent increase in out-of-pocket health care costs. About 20 percent of the membership came out to vote on the contract, which passed 256 to 108. The Dayton Board of Education, which said it had no money to pay for a raise because of a \$10 million budget deficit, praised the union for ratifying the contract.

This was the second vote organized by the teachers union in two weeks. A week earlier the union was unable to get the required one-fifth of the membership to the ratification meeting. Of the district's 1,816 teachers, 1,739 belong to the union. The teachers' previous three-year contract, which expired June 30, gave them a 3 percent raise each year, with no increase in health insurance premiums.

Forestry workers on strike in British Columbia

Twelve thousand members of the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers (IWA) union went on strike Saturday, July 1, in the coastal region of Canada's largest forestry exporting province. At the same time the strike threatens to expand to the interior region of the province where an additional 20,000 members of the union have been in a strike position since their contracts expired June 30.

The union is fighting concession demands by lumber producers organized as Representatives of Forrest Relations Management, including shift "flexibility" and working conditions. The union is seeking a 2 percent wage increase per year and employers are seeking concessions in other areas in exchange for the wage hike. The union has stated that they will resist any concessions because of their contribution in helping management cut costs by around 30 percent in recent years.

Settlements have at the same time been reached by bargaining units in the north. One local representing about 2,500 workers in the northern region reached a deal on Saturday prior to joining the strike, and on Friday, Canfor Corp. settled with their workers in an agreement separate from other northern producers. Those deals, which provide for a 2 percent per year wage increase, could be used as patterns for other locals who typically negotiate in a patchwork of contracts across the province. The last time forestry workers went on strike in BC was in 1986 and that action lasted four and a half months

Pilots in strike position at Air Canada

Talks are continuing between Air Canada, the country's largest carrier, and the Air Canada Pilots Association of Canada (ACPA), representing 2,200 pilots who have been in a legal strike position since a 95 percent vote on June 26 in favor of a strike.

The issues in the negotiations include wages, job security, safety and pensions. The impending merging of Air Canada with recently acquired Canadian Airlines raises particular concern for the pilots over both pensions and job security. Air Canada has offered a 14 percent wage hike over five years, but pilots are seeking parity with their counterparts in the United States who earn 30 percent more for the same job.

The pilots union has postponed calling a strike and must give 72 hours notice before any walkout. A strike at Air Canada would cripple air travel across the country, with few options for passengers. While pilots at Canadian Airlines, who are in a different union, are expected to continue working, they have said they will refuse extra flights and US pilots have also pledged to refuse to fly Air Canada routes in the event of a strike. The last strike by Air Canada pilots was for two weeks in 1998. It resulted in the contract that expired April 1.

In a related development, ground employees at four Canadian airports could soon be on strike according to a spokesperson for their union, the Union of Canadian Transportation Employees. The workers at Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Charlottetown airports include firefighters, maintenance and administrative personnel, who have also been without a contract for months and are fighting for job security and against cuts to benefits.



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