

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 July 2000

Owners wage intimidation campaign against union supporters in Nicaragua free trade zone

Ten workers, members of the Textile Federation of Shoes, Leather and Clothing who are trying to unionize maquiladora sweatshops in Nicaragua's free trade zone, have charged that they are being terrorized by the Chentex Company. The workers also say government officials are collaborating with the company to prevent unionization.

Union Secretary Pedro Ortega says that Chentex has refused to recognize the union since it was formed and a contract arrived at, two years ago. Instead, the Nicaraguan Labor Ministry has authorized management to fire union supporters, he said. Another company in the free trade zone, Mil Colores, has victimized 68 pro-union workers. The companies make use of compliant courts to frame up and jail union militants. The Labor Ministry is demanding that workers abandon their unions and join the government union, the Federation of Nicaraguan Workers (CTN). So far Chentex has fired some 300 workers who refuse to abandon their union.

Brazilian Social Security workers demand pay raise

On July 4, government employees in Sao Paulo, on strike since May 11, set up tents in front of the Brazilian National Social Security Institute (INSS) headquarters in that city. The Brazilian health and social security workers have not had a raise since 1995. They are demanding a 68 percent pay raise. Jose Rubens Decare, leader of the Union of Health and Security Workers of Sao Paulo (Sinsprev), said the purpose of the weeklong protest is to pressure the federal government to settle the strike.

Costa Rican workers denounce wage settlement

Public workers in Costa Rica have denounced a government wage offer and are threatening general strike action. On July 4, without any consultations with the unions, the government of Miguel Angel Rodriguez decreed that workers would receive a monthly wage increase of US\$15. The government previously mediated a 5 percent across-the-board increase for private sector workers, half of what they had asked for. Representatives of the Public Employees Union announced that they would not accept the government decree. They accused Rodriguez of arrogance and lack of respect for public employees.

Argentine public sector workers oppose pay cut

On July 5 union workers pressed Argentine President Fernando De la Rúa to submit to a judicial decision and cancel a wage cut decreed for public employees on May 29. The

“Combative” sector of the General Workers Federation (CGT) said it would take legal action if De la Rúa did not begin paying full wages in 24 hours. If on Monday, July 10 wages have still not been paid in full the union said it plans to launch nationwide protests of public employees and the unemployed, including blocking avenues and highways. The CGT has also threatened De la Rúa with a second national strike.

On May 29, De la Rúa decreed a wage cut of 12 percent for wages over US\$1,000 a month and 15 percent for wages over US\$6,500. In an affront to the CGT bureaucracy, De la Rúa is proposing that workers be allowed to choose their own health plans, threatening the current system in which each union collects contributions from its own members.

Appeals court overturns unfair labor practice ruling against Detroit newspapers

A three-judge panel from the US Court of Appeals in Washington, DC overturned a decision by the National Labor Relations Board that blamed Detroit's two daily newspapers for provoking a 19-month strike by breaking federal labor laws. The appeals court said the six unions, representing 2,400 pressmen, reporters and other employees who struck the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* on July 13, 1995, walked out because they did not like management's offer, not because unfair labor practices had made negotiations impossible.

The ruling means that hundreds of striking employees who were replaced by scabs don't qualify for special protection under federal law that guarantees jobs to workers who strike because of management's unfair labor practices. The ruling also means strikers are not qualified for back pay from February 1997, when the unions unconditionally called off the strike without contracts. The back pay is estimated to be in the range of \$100 million.

The strike was provoked by the demands of the newspapers—which function under a joint operating agreement—for merit pay, staff reductions, work rule changes and an inadequate wage offer. Of the 2,400 workers who struck less than a third got their jobs back. Seven hundred jobs were eliminated. Two hundred workers were fired for picket line activity and several hundred more left town, retired or got other jobs. This disastrous result was chiefly the responsibility of the leadership of the Teamsters, the Guild and other AFL-CIO unions, which encouraged workers to place their faith in the National Labor Relations Board and a boycott campaign, while the unions blocked any broader movement of the working class.

Unions reach seven-year deal with Denver newspapers

The six unions representing 2,600 newspaper employees have reached a seven-year deal with the company being formed to run the business operations of the Denver Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Post. The Communications Workers of America, Graphic Communications International Union, Teamsters and three other unions accepted a deal that provides two consecutive pay increases of 3 percent beginning one year after formation of the Denver Newspaper Agency. In exchange the company has pledged not to lay off workers for two years, and instead to carry out job reductions through attrition or buyouts.

Judge moves to block Los Angeles transit strike

In an effort to prevent a strike by 6,700 Los Angeles transit workers during the upcoming Democratic National Convention, Superior Court Judge Dzintra Janavs granted a temporary restraining order barring a walkout until July 25, pending arguments on a preliminary injunction. A cooling-off period is then expected to be extended to September 3, two weeks after the convention.

Governor Gray Davis asked the state attorney general to seek a 60-day injunction to prevent three unions from striking the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. A strike in the city that lobbied hard to host the August 14-17 convention could prove politically embarrassing for Davis, a Democrat who has endorsed Vice President Al Gore. Contracts for the unions expired July 8. Two of the unions have authorized a strike, although no walkout date was set.

Clerical and technical workers unionize at Wichita, Kansas Boeing plant

Clerical and technical workers at Boeing's Wichita, Kansas facility narrowly voted last week to affiliate with the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace, the same union representing Boeing engineers. The vote was close, with 1,924 workers—50.9 percent—voting in favor of SPEEA, which led a strike of engineers and other white collar workers against Boeing last year. The company is challenging the results of the election.

IUE members at General Electric ratify contract

Members of the International Union of Electronic Workers (IUE) voted to accept a tentative contract agreed to last month with General Electric Co., which includes wage increases and inducements for older workers to retire, plus greater out-of-pocket health care costs for workers. The three-year deal was ratified by an 83 percent margin. The IUE is the largest of the 14 unions under contract with GE, representing 20,000 of the 40,000 workers covered by the talks. The contract strengthens so-called job preservation committees, labor-management bodies designed to boost productivity and cut costs in plants deemed noncompetitive, and doubles—to a full year—the amount of warning GE must give before closing plants. Other unions are holding separate ratification votes over the next several weeks.

Workers mount wildcat strike at Vancouver Hotels

Over 2,000 members of the Hotel, Restaurant, Bartenders & Culinary Employees Union went on strike last week at seven of Vancouver's largest hotels against the wishes of the union leadership. The union had refused to sanction the action by workers despite the fact that they are in a legal strike position.

The union representing the workers, including doormen, bartenders, cooks and dishwashers, has been in mediated talks seeking parity with other hotels in the region, which were not struck. The hotels affected by the strike are in the lower coastal area of British Columbia and include the Four Seasons, Hyatt Regency, Renaissance, Westin Bayshore, Delta Pacific Resort, Delta Airport hotel and Holiday Inn Vancouver Centre.

The strike was provoked by a June 18 offer which included a zero increase in wages this year, and 1 percent increases in years two and three of the contract. Frustrated with the ineffectiveness of their leadership, union members took it upon themselves to stage the walkout. Since then, the union leadership has maneuvered to corral the movement, recommending that they reject the latest offer over the weekend of a 12 percent wage increase over four years—although the union is officially on seeking a 9 percent raise over three years. Union President Nick Warhoag responded to the action saying, “Workers get frustrated with their union, they get frustrated with their employer. I'm not surprised and I'm not hurt by it.” Workers will vote Wednesday, July 12 on the latest offer.

Tentative settlement in British Columbia forestry strike

A tentative deal has been reached between BC forestry workers and employers to end the two-week strike in the province's largest industry. The International Woodworkers of America (IWA) reached the agreement—following settlements affecting lumber workers in the north last week—in order to prevent the strike from spreading across the province.

A three-year agreement negotiated by the IWA provides wage increases of 2 percent per year and improvements in health care, pension and long-term disability provisions. According to the union, the contentious demand of shift flexibility sought by employers has been resolved. The deal affecting nearly 12,000 workers in the coastal area will be put to a vote this week.



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