Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 July 2000

Bolivian truckers protest

Hundreds of truckers blocked Bolivia's main highways on July 10 to protest high fuel prices and lack of government action on lowering tariffs on replacement parts and repairing roads. Last Friday, Bolivian President Hugo Banzer froze gasoline and diesel prices for a year. The truckers rejected the measure, calling it “an aspirin to a terminally ill patient.” Joining the truck drivers were inter-urban bus drivers.

Venezuelan students denounce government violence

Venezuelan students from several cities came to Caracas on July 13 to protest repression by security agencies and demand an end to the use of firearms and toxic gases against their protests. The Venezuelan National Guard shot and wounded Danilo Leon, a student in southern Venezuela. The students also denounced the lack of medical assistance.

Mexican teachers strike supporter believed kidnapped

Professor Placido Camargo Ruiz, an active participant in teachers strikes last May and June, appears to have been kidnapped while on his job. Ruiz has not been seen since June 16. He is thought to have been taken either by the federal police or by paramilitary groups linked to the government in retaliation for his participation in the protests and strikes that paralyzed primary schools in several states. Ruiz is not the first kidnapped teacher. Mexican authorities claim that they do not know the whereabouts of several other missing teachers.

Street fighting in Dominican Republic

Street fighting broke out on July 15 in Azua and San Cristobal, south of Santo Domingo after police attacked a squatters camp. Four people were wounded and 100 arrested. The incident began on July 13, when the police violently removed 50 poor families that had erected homes on private land. Protesters took to the streets, stoned businesses and set cars on fire.

Officials from professional union “mending fences” with Boeing management

Boeing Co. officials and leaders of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) met July 12 in what has been described as “fence mending” after this year's 40-day strike by 17,000 engineers and technical workers at the company's giant operations in Seattle, Washington and other locations. SPEEA Executive Director Charles Bofferding announced that he was “very impressed by the commitment of the people at the meetings.”

The accumulative buildup of job cuts, increased workloads and deterioration of wage and benefits due to corporate belt-tightening and inflation led to an upheaval within the ranks of the white-collar workers whose scope and force caught both the company and union off guard. The July 12 meeting was part of an effort to foster labor-management collaboration on the part of the AFL-CIO-affiliated union. Boeing management, which has long collaborated with the International Association of Machinists union to cut jobs and increase output from production workers, is looking for SPEEA officials to suppress the militancy of the professional workers.

IAM launches toothless media campaign against spin-off of Boeing jobs

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) District Lodge 751 at Boeing in the Seattle, Washington area has announced it will conduct a media campaign against the what is rumored as a move by the company to sell off parts of its industrial operations. The aerospace giant admits it is looking at options to increase profitability and competitiveness, but denies it has made a decision. The company recently put up a St. Louis plant for sale along with other properties. It has also begun to consolidate its Delta rocket program, threatening hundreds of jobs.

The downsizing threats come less than a year after IAM officials claimed workers had won unprecedented job security protections in the 1999 contract. The IAM campaign is based on efforts to win the support of local big business politicians and its willingness to offer up further concessions to the company to prevent a sell-off of its operations.

Contract for ground workers expires at United Airlines

The contract covering 47,000 mechanics, ground workers and customer service representatives at United Airlines became “amenable” July 12, as the company and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) have not reached a tentative agreement despite several months of negotiations.

Both the company and union are determined to conclude an agreement without a strike by IAM members who gave

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concessions to the company during the 1990s that the union used to obtain a major stake in the company. United, which is the world's largest airline, said of the failure to reach an agreement, “It's going to be business as usual as far as we're concerned.” The IAM reinforced this sentiment, declaring, “Our contract is still in effect and any kind of slowdown would be illegal.”

Under the National Railway Labor Act, workers need permission from a federal mediator to strike. The granting of strike permission is further delayed by a 30-day cooling-off period. The “amenable” date applied to contracts in the airline industry is simply a euphemism for the end of a contract period. The airline industry with the collaboration of the unions has exploited the mechanism of the National Railway Labor Act during the last decade to such a degree that several years pass before a new contract is put in place. This allows the airline to stonewall the workers' demands for improved living standards while amassing profits.

Chicago food workers strike against seven-day workweek

Workers at the Chicago food products company “Appetizers And, Inc.” struck July 10 to protest against the company's attempt to implement a seven-day workweek. The company is seeking to run roughshod over 280 members of the Laborers' Local 681 unit who are predominantly Hispanic and female. The company is also seeking to eliminate seniority pay to long-term workers. The local's business rep admitted that the company's wage proposals “barely exceed the expected minimum wage proposals under consideration in Congress.”

Air Canada pilots delay strike

The union representing 2,200 pilots at Canada's largest air carrier has rejected arbitration but has delayed any strike action. The union—which has been in legal strike position since June 26—withdrew from talks with Air Canada negotiators late last Friday, July 14. The Air Canada Pilots Association (ACPA) has hinted that it may opt for a work-to-rule action.

In withdrawing from the talks, negotiators for ACPA said that the company had not demonstrated its willingness to seriously deal with concerns, which include wages, pensions and job security. Captain Raymond Hall, spokesperson for the pilots, said, “The Air Canada pilots have been in negotiations since early February. Yet the end result is that we have made no progress on major issues that are essential to our professional livelihood.” The airline responded by withdrawing their latest offer, saying they “remain ready to reformulate a different offer acceptable to both parties on reasonable terms and conditions.”

At the same time support workers at the Saskatoon airport in the prairie province of Saskatchewan, members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), went on strike last Friday over wages and job security. Other PSAC workers in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island arrived at that airport Thursday morning to begin strike action but were told by their union leadership that a deal had been reached overnight. Maintenance and administrative staff at Regina and Edmonton are also in a strike position, but have not yet announced any similar action.

Bitterness in third week of Vancouver hotel strike

Amidst allegations that management is using replacement workers, the strike that began as a wildcat by 2,000 employees at seven of this coastal city's largest hotels shows signs of becoming a protracted struggle. On July 12, the striking members of the Hotel Restaurant Culinary Employees & Bartenders' Union Local 40, voted 71 percent to reject an offer from Greater Vancouver Hotel Employers Association (GVHEA) and talks have since broken down.

Nonunion workers are being used to do union jobs at different hotels, and in one incident at the Hyatt Regency a clear provocation was organized by management. Last Thursday security guards at the hotel cleared a path through the picket line for scab replacements to unload a truck full of luggage into the hotel, resulting in a violent confrontation. The union has filed a complaint over the incident with the Labour Relations Board.

The job action comes at the height of the tourist season in the province of British Columbia. Although the “Big Seven” hotels affected provide only around 10 percent of hotel rooms in Vancouver, they are some of the most prestigious. These include the Four Seasons, Hyatt Regency, Renaissance, Westin Bayshore, Delta Pacific Resort, Delta Airport hotel and Holiday Inn Vancouver Centre. Three of the hotels have already announced that they have had to cancel reservations for large groups and conventions. Striking workers are seeking parity with other hotels in the Vancouver area in an industry where wages are already about 30 percent below the provincial average of $630 a week.

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