Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 August 2000

National strike in Colombia

Colombian unions and social organizations carried out a twenty-four hour general strike and civic protests against the economic policies of the Colombian government. As many as 700,000 workers, mostly public and transport workers, participated in the strike.

According to Luis Eduardo Garzon, president of the United Workers Central (CUT), the objective of the protest strike was to condemn the government's tax and social security policies, the reduced buying power of workers' wages, and layoffs. Colombia's official unemployment rate exceeds 20 percent. CUT leaders insist that the actual rate approaches forty percent. Last week the government announced the layoff of an additional 5000 government employees.

The government of Andres Pastrana is faithfully carrying out an austerity program, agreed upon earlier this year with the International Monetary Fund, which involves dedicating 40 percent of the government's budget to reduce Colombia's massive indebtedness. Pastrana's policies have deepened the nation's economic recession, which resulted in a nearly 5 percent drop in the Gross Domestic Product last year.

Ecuadorian protests against privatization

Indian and social organizations launched a campaign for a popular referendum on privatization. The petition demands the “re-establishment of the Ecuadorian Republic,” which according to its proponents, means the elimination of the economic strategy pursued by president Gustavo Noboa, and an end to the privatization of national industries and utilities.

Last Wednesday, August 2, after presenting the signatures before Ecuador's Supreme Election Tribunal, hundreds of referendum supporters made a human chain around Congress to demand that the legislature rescind two privatization measures under consideration.

The dollarization of Ecuador's economy is rapidly raising consumer prices. *Diario Hoy*, one of Quito's dailies, reported on Sunday August 6 that consumers can expect to pay the same prices in Quito as in Miami, for many consumer items, while wages remain depressed. An immediate effect of the new economic policies has been an exodus of Ecuadorians to the United States. The largest group of 5000 would-be-immigrants is now reported to be in Central America, trekking towards the US-Mexican border.

Women workers to march in Brazil

On August 10, the World March of Women is expected to bring 20,000 women to Brasilia, Brazil's capital. This would make it the largest demonstration of women workers in the history of Brazil.

The National Federation of Rural Workers (CONTAG) is organizing the march. The March has been named “The Margaritas,” in honor of Margarita Moreira Alvez, who was assassinated during the struggle for land reform. The purpose of the march will be to protest social misery, economic inequality and violence against women.

Salvadoran workers oppose government policies

Tourism workers in El Salvador are protesting the policies of labor flexibility and other proposals made by the National Association of Private Businesses to attract foreign investment. Among other changes, the measure would change the way in which overtime hours are calculated, from a daily to a weekly basis.

The union that represents tourism workers denounced the draft measure because it would eliminate overtime and night pay. It would also replace permanent workers with part-timers.

Peruvian students protest police abuse

The Peruvian Student Federation denounced the abuses committed by the National Police force during the July 28 demonstrations against the swearing in of President Fujimori. Dozens of students were beaten and injured by tear gas canisters fired directly at them during the protests. The students are demanding the resignation of the chief of the national police.

Overtime ban by pilots causes cancellations at United Airlines

United Airlines was forced to cancel some 270 flights out of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport over the weekend due to a ban by its pilots on overtime.

Members of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) have been refusing to work overtime since the expiration of their contract in April. ALPA and United are presently holding mediated talks and anticipate a tentative agreement in September. Issues separating the two sides are flight assignments, salary and benefits. The issue of job security also looms large as United announced earlier this year it planned to acquire US Airways which ranks number six among US carriers.

Los Angeles hotel workers protest

Police in riot gear issued 35 citations against hotel workers protesting outside the New Otani Hotel in Los Angeles August

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3, in a campaign by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) union to win union recognition. Several hundred Otani hotel workers along with supporters gathered in front of the hotel during the 5 p.m. rush hour and began to block traffic. The police citations were issued for a failure to disperse.

The incident highlights the plight by the area's hotel workers who are poorly paid and largely immigrant.

HERE officials are staging the protests in the lead up to the August 14-17 Democratic National Convention, in an effort to press the Democrats to support their unionizing efforts. Jonathon Tisch, an heir to the $21 billion Tisch fortune and CEO of the Loews Hotels, has been a long-time friend and major donor to Vice President Al Gore. Tisch was the single largest contributor to an operation aimed at defeating an AFL-CIO-backed living wage ordinance in Santa Monica, California where the HERE is attempting to unionize 300 workers at one of Tisch's hotels.

California hospital workers launch two-day strike to demand contract

Some 3,500 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 250 launched a two-day walkout August 2 at 8 hospitals in the Bay area of San Francisco and Oakland to protest the slow pace of contract negotiations, and win support to their opposition to management's continued reductions of staffing levels that are responsible for fatigue in the workforce and a decline in patient care.

The negotiations between the SEIU and Catholic Healthcare West, which owns three of the hospitals, and Sutter Health, the operator of the other five, are also dealing with job security, higher pay and pension improvements. The strike involves vocational nurses, lab technicians, therapists, clerks and housekeepers - virtually all employees except doctors and registered nurses.

One particular practice that workers oppose is management's policy of forcing workers to take unpaid days off when patient levels fall off. The policy is fueled by government cutbacks to hospitals and so-called “managed care,” which is nothing more than health care corporations seeking to wring profit out of hospitals at the expense of workers and patients. The hospital administration has responded to strikers by declaring they will not offer “guaranteed jobs for life,” warning that it would place the operations profitable footing in jeopardy.

Concerning staffing levels, one female X-ray technologist told the *San Francisco Mercury News*, “I usually have to lift the patient up myself and also get the film cassette underneath the patient and hold the gurney still with my foot. I don't understand why they would have so little respect for us.”

Nickel workers on strike in Sudbury

1,260 employees went on strike August 1, at the mines of Falconbridge Inc. in the central Ontario mining district of Sudbury. Members of Mine Mill / Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), are at the same time fighting the use of at least 20 scab replacements hired by the company through the union buster Accu-fax since the strike began.

Workers voted 90 percent in favor of a strike last week when presented with the final contract offer of Falconbridge, which the union said provided less than what was recently won by workers at Inco, the company's main competitor. While mining, milling and smelting operations have been shut down at five Falconbridge plants in the area, 460 administrative and office workers remain on the job.

The company was prepared for a strike and shut down its smelter on July 31, sending workers home with pay. Talks broke down last week and are expected to resume soon, but the company is bent on major changes to the collective agreement which it says are needed to keep it economically viable. In addition, issues have arisen over company plans to split operations in Sudbury which threaten pension and seniority provisions for workers.

Along with some copper mining, Falconbridge produces 4 percent of the world's nickel supply and prices for the metal rose $30 a ton with news of the strike. The company last month realized its highest price for nickel in over a decade and is said to have at least a month's supply. The last strike at Falconbridge was in 1997 and lasted almost a month.

McDonald's workers fight to unionize in Montreal

About 40 workers at a downtown franchise of McDonalds's in Montreal are fighting the world's largest fast-food giant for union certification. More than 80 percent of employees voted to join the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) in a bid for improved wages and working conditions against the notoriously anti-union McDonald's Corporation.

It has been reported that the franchise owners began firings at the downtown outlet on Peel Street on the same day the union filed for certification and management has been unavailable for comment. The mostly younger employees are said to have been inspired by a documentary film of a failed unionization drive at the Plateau franchise in Quebec “Un Syndicat Avec Ca?” (A Union With That?) which showed company union busting tactics.

This is the latest in a series of struggles to organize unions at McDonald's in Canada over the past several years. Teamsters won the first union contract at a McDonald's in1998, but it was closed two weeks later. Teamsters failed in its drive to organize two McDonald's in the Montreal area later that year. The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) won a union contract at a McDonald's in Squamish, BC in 1998, but under company pressure, workers voted a year later to decertify.

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