

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 August 2000

Brazilian airline strike

Workers for VASP airlines struck for 24 hours last Monday. They demanded that the government take over this heavily indebted company in the wake of mass layoffs and nonpayment of wages. VASP is Brazil's second largest airline.

Union leaders indicated that VASP management is putting the safety of flights in danger by ignoring the deteriorated state of the airline. They pronounced the airline in technical bankruptcy and accused it of covering its losses from the wages and pensions of its employees.

VASP was hard hit by last year's economic emergency. Saddled with excessive debt, it is now carrying out a reorganization process. While claiming that it would surpass VARIG, Brazil's flagship airline, in 2002, in the last four months its workforce has gone from 8,000 to 4,800 employees. It recently lost 17 of its 49 airplanes because it could not pay for them.

Earlier this year VASP stopped serving the United States and Europe. The airline lost \$52 million last year and owes millions to its creditors.

Steel strike ends in Mexico

Four thousand three hundred workers ended their strike against 12 steel plants in Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan, Mexico on Monday, August 7, after receiving a 12 percent wage increase.

The workers, members of the National Miners and Metalworkers Union (SNTMMS), approved a contract that barely exceeds last year's inflation rate of about 10 percent.

Landless movement protests in Brazil

Thousands of supporters of the Movement of Landless Workers (MST) protested on August 10 in Brasilia, Brazil's capital city. They rallied in front of the United States embassy to demand a change in the government's economic policies.

"The policies of the Brazilian government are set by the IMF, which follows orders from the United States," said Christiane Campos, spokesperson for the MST. Protesters burned a flag with the initials of the International

Monetary Fund.

Joining the MST marchers were thousands of rural women marching with empty pots, protesting poverty and violence in the countryside. The demonstration was the closing action of the Fourth Congress of the MST. The Congress decided to continue its policies of land occupations to force agrarian reform.

Government official intervenes in United Airlines talks

US Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater met with representatives of United Airlines and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) August 11. The nation's largest airline is mired in slow-moving contract talks and plagued by flight cancellations due to the refusal of its pilots to work overtime.

Both the company and ALPA declared at the end of the day that they would be able to conclude talks by the end of this week, but there are indications the two sides may be unable to reach an agreement. Although federal law bars the union from striking until an impasse is declared and a 30-day cooling-off period expires, the pilots have been taking advantage of a clause in their contract that allows them to refuse overtime to demonstrate deep-seated grievances towards the company.

Last week United was forced to cancel 614 flights due to pilots fulfilling their weekly flight hours and declining overtime. The figure represented a new high since the expiration of the old contract on April 12. Between May and August some 4,800 flights have been cancelled. The company is already predicting it will have to cancel 3 percent of its flights in September, amounting to about 2,000 in all, and a slightly smaller number in October.

The resistance by pilots is predicted to further mushroom if a tentative agreement is not reached by the target date of September 4. ALPA pushed through concessions on its pilots during the 1990s in exchange for the union receiving a 25 percent share of the company's stock. In addition, ALPA got a seat on the board of directors. But the union has no say over the running of the airlines and a largely decorative impact on the selection of

the airline's CEO.

While the deal enhanced the position of the bureaucracy it has done nothing to advance the interests of the pilots who are seeking adjustments in wages, benefits and work rules after falling behind in recent years.

Farm workers march in Washington state

Two thousand farm workers and their supporter marched four and a half miles in Washington state's south-central region where they pick apples under substandard conditions. The workers, represented by the United Farm Workers union, are demanding higher wages, amnesty for undocumented workers and an end to reprisals taken against workers who come forward as organizers for the UFW.

Speaking to the demonstration, UFW national President Arturo Rodriguez declared, "We have literally millions of Latinos and people of other ethnicities performing the work that other people don't want to do and they're treated like second-class citizens." Some farm workers make about \$6.50 an hour picking apples. Others, who are paid by volume, say they are making only \$9 or \$10 an hour per bin, or about \$5 less than what they received three years ago. Farm worker Arnulfo Ramirez warned, "We cannot feed our families with these low wages and we will stop working if necessary to get a fair wage."

American Airlines fined for job discrimination against disabled

American Airlines agreed to pay out \$1.7 million to 99 people who applied at the airlines between 1988 and 1990 and were rejected for employment on unjust medical grounds. The workers who suffered discrimination applied for work as ticket agents, mechanics and part-time fleet workers serving as baggage handlers, cleaners and ground workers who guide planes to and from the airport gates. American, while paying out the money, has denied any wrongdoing.

As a carrier of US mail, American came under the Equal Employment Opportunity act and failed to correspond to federal hiring practices. The Labor Department found that the company used medical tests for blood pressure, vision, hearing and asthma to disqualify people for employment.

"These folks were not hired because they were in our judgment not physically able to do the job safely," said American's spokesperson. But government medical experts who investigated the cases determined the company had "no medical basis" for its actions.

BC doctors warn of province-wide walkout if deal not reached

About 60 physicians in nine British Columbia rural communities including Cranbrook, Terrace and Kemberely have agreed to delay plans to walk off the job in order to begin negotiations with the BC government. Despite the reprieve for the provincial government, doctors are warning of a province-wide walkout if a satisfactory agreement is not reached by August 31.

The doctors are seeking a deal similar to the \$10 million government package approved by doctors in Prince George. The package provided an increase of close to \$1 million from its original offer for recruitment, training and retention, plus on-call pay.

Meanwhile, the NDP government has found itself in a political crisis with the doctor's walkout in Prince George triggering a domino effect throughout the province. Premier Ujjal Dosanjh has said that any deal is to include a guarantee of no further work stoppages.

In response, Dr. Ross Dawson, president of the Cranbrook Regional Hospital medical staff, has warned that if the BC government does not "come with a sincere response to get this resolved, the potential is for province-wide job action outside the urban centres," adding that even if the compensation issue is resolved, Cranbrook doctors will continue in their fight for hospital improvements. "Most of our medical staff felt the hospital issues are more important than our recruitment and retention issues." The lack of nursing staff has caused operating rooms to sit empty. Also shortages of instruments have delayed surgeries while the instruments are being sterilized.

Ottawa's drastic cutbacks to healthcare in the mid-1990s, coupled with the BC government's 1996 cap on doctors' fees for service billing, have been the major causes for the dilapidating conditions in funding.

Other medical communities involved in this dispute are: Quesnel, Nelson, Campbell River, Castlegar and Trail.



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