

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 August 2000

## **Mexican government orders Volkswagen strikers back to work**

A Mexican government labor board declared a four-day-old strike by workers at a Volkswagen AG “without legal grounds” and ordered the workers back to work under threat of losing their jobs. Workers at the plant in Puebla, some 60 miles (100 km) east of Mexico City, walked out on August 18 after 10 days of salary talks ended in a stalemate. The factory is also Volkswagen's only remaining plant to produce the New Beetle's predecessor, the VW Bug. Volkswagen, Mexico's biggest car exporter and producer, had offered the 12,600 workers a 12 percent wage hike. The union, however, has demanded wages that reward productivity.

## **Suriname government says it has no money to pay government workers**

New Finance Minister Humphrey Hildenberg said August 24 that Suriname's treasury does not have enough money to pay government employees or meet other obligations by the end of the month. The new administration of President Ronald Venetiaan took over the South American country's government two weeks ago after former President Jules Wijdenbosch's defeat in May elections. The former Dutch colony has debt of 487 billion guilders (\$226.5 million), the finance minister said, of which 331 billion (\$153.9 million) is foreign debt. Hildenberg says he inherited a treasury with only 1.3 billion guilders (\$605,000) and “by hook or crook may rake together 3 billion [\$1.3 million],” but needs 11 billion (\$5.1 million) to pay salaries, not counting pensions and allowances.

## **Massachusetts defense workers strike Raytheon**

Some 3,000 defense workers at Raytheon Co. in Massachusetts voted to strike the military contractor after the company failed to improve its proposals for health care coverage and job security. The jobs issue looms large because of years of downsizing. The membership of Local 1505 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) has fallen from 10,000 workers in the early 1990s to the present 3,000 members at 10 different

plants in the state. The IBEW believes Raytheon has plans to move more of its Massachusetts manufacturing and maintenance to Arizona and Texas. Raytheon, which manufactures the Patriot missile and Hawk missile defense system, is the third largest defense contractor in the US and commands a worldwide workforce of 94,000.

## **Maine shipyard workers vote to strike**

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local S6 rejected wage and work rule proposals from the shipbuilder Bath Iron Works in Portland, Maine and voted by an 85 percent margin to walk off the job. Bath Iron Works, a subsidiary of General Dynamics, doubled its pay proposal in the last week of negotiations in an effort to close the gap, but still remains at 50 percent of what the union is demanding. The average yearly pay for the 4,800 members of the bargaining unit is \$32,000.

“You've got a corporation slurping up military contracts, and you know that those contracts are overcharged to the taxpayer,” an electrician told the Associated Press. “These guys get the money, and they're not willing to share.” Workers are even more concerned over company plans to implement cross-training provisions that weaken job classifications and facilitate a reduction of the workforce. “This is about their ability to lay off as many people as they can,” said another worker. Bath Iron Works builds the \$900 million Aegis destroyer for the US Navy. The IAM last struck the company in 1985 in a walkout lasting 99 days.

## **Atlanta Ballet recruits strikebreakers from Czech Republic**

The Atlanta Ballet has contracted to bring orchestra musicians from the Czech Republic to the United States in an effort to break the strike by the Atlanta Federation of Musicians Local 148-462. The ballet's orchestra struck the 71-year-old company about one year ago over pension issues. The Atlanta Ballet is scheduled to open its season in October with *Romeo and Juliet* and follow with its annual Christmas feature of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. To guarantee its performances the company contracted with the Prague company Poksound to provide 44

musicians for *Romeo and Juliet* and 25 musicians for *The Nutcracker*.

"It's like hiring migrant workers to come in and pick your cotton for a day," Andrew Cox, the orchestra's secretary treasurer, told the Associated Press. "It's a plantation mentality." The Atlanta Ballet insists the musicians are only temporary replacements. However it is refusing to budge from its contract position that it will not make any payments into the musicians' pension plan. The company also does not make any contributions to the dancers' pension funds.

#### **Air Canada pilots angry over tentative agreement**

Air Canada pilots expressed anger over their union's tentative agreement to accept a mediated settlement with the airline. After talks broke down on August 18, the federal government persuaded the pilots to hold off on strike action until federal mediator Bruce Outhouse made his report on the failed talks and recommendations. Air Canada has stated that Outhouse's report was a "generous recommendation of settlement and provoked the union to settle or go on strike." Serge Beaulieu, spokesman for the union's 2,200 members, said, "We came to the conclusion that we should accept what was on the table ... we didn't get pay parity—at least not for now. That's a longer term project and we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

In the 1990s, when airlines were facing economic difficulties, the pilots accepted concessions on wages and working conditions. While airline profits and share prices are presently at all-time highs, pilots know that within this highly cyclical industry an economic downturn would make any future gains impossible. The mediator proposed that the pilots accept a wage agreement of annual increases of 5 percent, 3 percent and 2.5 percent. In an attempt to win wage parity with their American counterparts, who earn 30 percent more, the pilots had asked for a three-year contract with annual wage increases of 8.75 percent, 3 percent, and 2.5 percent.

Job security and safety issues are also of major concern to pilots, as Air Canada plans to increase the number of jets flown by its regional affiliates, such as Air Ontario. This means pilots with inadequate experience will be performing the same tasks as Air Canada pilots, but for lower wages. In response, Outhouse recommended a guarantee against layoffs or forced relocations until the 2004. But pilots complain that the report does not address the issue of augmentation of crew members for flying long hours. In the United States long flights require two crews, made up of two captains and two officers while Air Canada contracts only one crew member and one relief

pilot, who is only qualified to fly at cruising altitudes. With federal elections approaching next year, big business is waiting to see what kind of muscle the Chretien government will use to prevent a strike. Parliament has been ready to step in with back-to-work legislation.

#### **Social workers to vote on tentative pact**

A tentative agreement has been reached between the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto and its 243 social workers, who have been on strike since July 14. The social workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 2190, have twice voted against the agency's contract offers. The labour dispute has revolved primarily around excessive workloads. Local President Sally Woodcock says that the agency's social workers have been handling anywhere from 20 to 30 caseloads at any given time, when ideally they should only be handling 17. The union blames the Tory government's welfare reforms, which have forced the social workers to spend more time processing mounds of paperwork than meeting with the children and their families. Both the CCAS board and Local 2190 are expected to vote on the agreement this Tuesday.

#### **Ontario Tory government proposes to raise maximum workweek to 60 hours**

The Harris government has continued in its assault on labour as it proposes changes to the existing Employment Standards Act. The proposal to raise the maximum hours of work from 48 hours a week to 60 would be a regression back to the 1940s, when a 60-hour week was standard. Labour Minister Chris Stockwell claims that changes are needed to adapt to a changing workplace demanding flexibility.



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