

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 September 2000

Colombian death squads attack militant workers

Labor leaders from the Department of Tolima in Colombia have launched a campaign to denounce violations of human rights against the labor movement in the region. Paramilitary death squads linked to the Colombian Army are carrying out a wave of attacks on militant workers. Last June 13 Reinaldo Mora Gomez, a teachers' leader, was assassinated. Other teachers have received death threats. On June 19 picketing health workers were videotaped and later attacked by the police. Members of the right-wing paramilitary forces have singled out activists for supposed guerrilla activities. The paramilitary forces are openly operating in the city of Ibague and have been linked to several assassinations in that city.

Argentine workers threaten a general strike

On September 6 about 3,000 workers in downtown Buenos Aires protested against government labor "reform" measures and wage cuts affecting public employees. At the demonstration, Hugo Moyano, a leader of the so-called combative sector of the General Federation of Labor (CGT), announced preparations for a general strike to demand the changes be rescinded. Last June, the Argentine government imposed these new measures, which include allowing companies to more easily layoff workers. Industry-wide contracts are now prohibited. Public outrage grew as it became known that as many as 11 opposition legislators may have accepted bribes to approve the measure.

Possible teachers strike in Bolivia

Leaders of the rural and urban teachers unions in Bolivia announced that the membership is poised to strike nationally if the Banzer government continues to ignore the unions' demands. The teachers are demanding a 50 percent pay increase.

On September 7 the teachers launched a 48-hour strike, which was preceded by a hunger strike by members of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Urban Teachers. In another development, leaders of urban teachers of the city of Oruro, halfway between the capitals of Sucre and La Paz, are marching toward La Paz to press their demands.

Striking New Jersey teachers defy a judge's back-to-work order

Teachers of the Hamilton Township school district in New Jersey voted unanimously September 7 to defy a state Superior Court judge's back-to-work order and returned to the picket line despite threats of being fined, fired or sent to jail. The contract for the Hamilton Township Education Association—representing 1,100 teachers and 400 support staff in the state's tenth largest district—expired June 30. Superior Court Judge Anthony J. Parrillo ordered the teachers back to work September 6 and ruled two days later that the union would be fined \$100,000-a-day if the teachers

do not return to work by September 10. The judge also ordered the teachers, school secretaries and other workers in the district's 24 schools to pay daily fines of \$50 to \$300 for each "unexcused absence."

Of the unanimous vote to defy the back-to-work order, New Jersey Education Association spokeswoman Karen Joseph said, "Everyone in the room said, yes, they understood they could be fined, they could be fired, they could be jailed, they could be assigned community service, but that's when you have to take a stand. That's what you have to do." Joseph indicated that the teachers were demanding smaller raises than they wanted for the past 10 years even though the 13,000-student district has a \$4.5 million surplus and taxpayers have voted three years in a row to support the school budget.

Advertisers claim commercial production constant on eve of new contract talks with striking actors

The advertising industry announced figures claiming to support their position that the 19 week-old strike by 135,000 commercial actors is failing to have a detrimental effect on production of ads for television. The report, released on the eve of a new attempt at negotiations between the unions and the industry, tout an increase from 1,725 commercial shoots in July to 2,010 in August. While picketing by striking actors has forced a decline of commercial shots done in traditional areas such as Los Angeles, the advertising industry has tried to circumvent this with what one producer described as a "cloak-and-dagger" procedure aimed at keeping commercial shots secret. Advertisers have also expanded production outside the United States in countries such as Canada, South Africa, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy and South America. The leadership of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) have done little more than appeal to sport and television celebrities not to appear in commercials, and to corporate boards not use non-union actors in their ads.

Last week the unions praised a company producing ads for presidential candidate George W. Bush for agreeing to use union actors and adhering to terms similar to those being sought at the bargaining table. "We're pleased that Maverick Media will be producing radio and TV commercials for the Bush campaign under SAG and AFTRA interim agreements, demonstrating their belief in the value of union contracts for this vital advertising work," said SAG spokesman Krizman.

SAG has also admitted it is modifying some of its contract demands in preparation for talks with the advertisers on September 13 but hasn't indicated which contract issues are involved. Ira Shepard, chief negotiator for the ad industry, continued to put up a brazen front against the striking unions, declaring, "We're always

open to new ideas, and if they've got new ideas to propose, we'll listen," but, "they've got to come down out of the stratosphere."

The main issue over which the two sides have grappled involves the industry's demand to end the "pay per play" formula governing ads for network television whereby actors are compensated during a 13-week cycle by the number of times a commercial is aired. The advertisers want to substitute a flat fee similar to the compensation that which presently exists on cable television.

Mediated talks in Raytheon strike

A federal mediator brought together officials of the defense contractor Raytheon Corporation and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1505 in the first talks since workers walked off the job August 27. Workers rejected the company's original four-year contract offer objecting to provisions dealing with job protection, pension and health-care issues. The initial proposal included a wage increase amounting of 14.7 percent. But workers are most concerned about job security given the decline in union positions from some 10,000 in early 1990 to 2,700 today.

The IBEW has submitted revised proposals before the recent negotiations, including a demand to increase the number of union stewards from 11 to 13. Raytheon called the new proposals "unrealistic." The company has experienced the impact of some cutbacks in Pentagon spending and consolidations in the defense industry. It is also weighed down by more than \$9 billion in debt. The IBEW bureaucracy has complained that the company slashed the jobs of industrial union members while increasing its technical and white-collar staff.

Pilots' council approves contract at United Airlines

The Master Executive Council of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) agreed unanimously to okay the recent tentative agreement covering 10,000 pilots at United Airlines. The agreement is reputed to contain wage provisions making UAL pilots recipients of the highest salary compensations in the US airline industry. The wage increases are supposed to range between 45 to 55 percent over the life of the 4-year agreement. The hike in salaries is meant to compensate for a 15 percent reduction in wages stemming from concessions handed over by ALPA in 1994. The pilots contract at UAL, reputed to be 10 percent higher than any of the other bargaining units at other US airlines, is expected to give an upward spike to demands by other pilots.

Saskatchewan teachers on work-to-rule for improved wages

On September 8 more than 1,000 high school students gathered chanting "Settle it! Settle it!" in front of the Saskatchewan Legislative Building in Regina to push for a speedy resolution to the province-wide teacher contract dispute. The same day more than 12,000 teachers, members of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF,) began their province-wide work-to-rule campaign to demand improved wages. The Federation has advised its members to arrive shortly after the school day begins and to leave just shortly after it ends. All extracurricular activities have been cancelled. Teachers have ceased their noon-hour supervision, coaching of sports teams, involvement in drama clubs, band practices etc. A New Democratic Party/Liberal coalition government runs the province.

The province is taking a hard line similar to last year's assault by the union-backed NDP against the Saskatchewan nurses' strike. It is not known what the government is prepared to offer the teachers, but in the spring, the teachers rejected a 2-year deal with a 7 percent increase in salary and benefits. The STF is currently demanding a 17.3 per cent increase in wages and benefits over the next 3 years. Both sides have been in negotiations since last fall. Meanwhile, Toronto's 7,000 public high school teachers have been directed by their union not to participate in any extra curricular activities until October 2, at which time they will consider further job action if no progress is made in negotiations with the Toronto District School Board.

Caregivers for the elderly strike in North Toronto

Community workers who look after elderly people went on strike September 7 after talks broke down with the union and their employer, Senior Peoples' Resources in North Toronto. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3896, which represents the 180 caregivers, is asking for an annual 2 percent wage over 2 years, an employer-paid benefit plan for workers who do more than 20 hours a week and improved sick leave.

Jane Moore, the agency's executive director, acknowledged that the caregivers' demands were reasonable but claimed the agency did not have enough to pay them. "If we had the money we'd give them what they wanted and we'd give it instantly. They deserve what they're asking for," Moore said. Earlier last week, Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer announced that the provincial Tory government will be providing \$92.5 million to agencies for the provisions of community health care. Moore estimates that the agency will only receive about \$50,000 of this, calling it "a drop in the bucket" compared to its \$6 million budget. The Caregivers have been without a contract since February.

Zehrs grocery store workers on strike

About 7,600 workers at Zehrs grocery stores voted to reject their employer's final offer and walked off the job September 8, closing the chain of 46 stores across Ontario. In a news release later that day, Zehrs said that the company will request a supervised vote from the Ministry of Labour. Full-time produce clerks, who presently earn \$18.51 an hour were offered an increase of \$1.10 over the life of another 6-year contract, plus what the union called a "minimal" lump sum. Part-time employees, who earn between \$6.90 to \$14.49 an hour, have been offered 70 cents over 6 years along with an unreported lump sum. The workers, who are members of United Food and Commercial Worker's Union, Local 1977, say that it's not enough and that wages are the primary issue. Zehrs is owned by Canada's largest grocery store chain, Loblaw Cos. Ltd.



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