

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 September 2000

## Haitians protest high fuel prices

On September 11 schools, retail stores and public transport shut down in cities in Haiti as a result of a strike by fuel distributors and truckers to protest the government's decision to raise fuel prices. Public transit drivers also struck to protest fuel increases. Observers consider that Haiti faces a very difficult period, caused by a structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

## Uruguayans march for housing rights

On Friday, September 15, Uruguayan construction workers and housing activists marched to demand jobs and greater subsidies for housing. The Uruguayan Federation of Housing Cooperatives organized the demonstration. The marchers walked through the streets of Montevideo followed by two youth dressed as rheas, ostrich-like birds common in southern South America. The costumes were a sarcastic reference to President Jorge Battle's declaration that the exportation of birds was going to "rescue the country" from its economic crisis.

A participant in the march declared "right now, all we export is people, not rheas." At a rally in front of the presidential building, the protesters announced the formation of a social front to fight the Battle administration. They also announced their intention to organize a "March of the Passports," from the president's office to Carrasco International Airport. Official figures indicate that 300 passports are issued every day, an indication of the large number of job-seekers leaving Uruguay. Uruguay has an official unemployment rate of 17 percent.

## Uruguayan unions protest repression and unemployment

The Inter-Union Plenum-National Convention of Uruguay, demanding an end to political repression against trade union members, has threatened to launch a national strike on October 12.

The federation will ask President Jorge Battle, Parliament and the Chambers of Commerce of Uruguay not to interfere with the rights of workers who wish to join unions. Furthermore, the federation declared that it considers the struggle against unemployment its main goal. It called for the formation of a "job exchange to benefit the unemployed and partially employed.

## Bolivian teachers strike

Urban teachers in Bolivia went on strike on September 12 after a government spokesperson declared that it would not raise teachers' salaries. The teachers are demanding a 50 percent wage increase. The strike has included mass mobilizations and the blocking of roads. Hundreds of teachers marched on the first day of the strike through one of La Paz's main avenues, Paseo de El Prado, causing traffic tie-ups.

Education Minister, Tito Hoz declared that "the budget is closed." However, he invited teachers' leaders to engage in

negotiations to improve the 60-dollar monthly starting pay that new teachers get. The teachers rejected the invitation. The teachers are also demanding the cancellation of the legislation that interferes with the rights of teachers and students in the classroom.

On September 14 and 15 thousands of teachers from La Paz and other cities rallied in front of the government building. Students and professors from Twentieth Century University, also joined the striking teachers at this demonstration, as well as telephone workers opposed to the privatization of the telecommunications industry in Bolivia.

The protest movement is expected to grow during the week of September 18, when workers from Bolivia's Unified Labor Federation of Rural Workers (CSUTCB) join the protests and the Union of Rural Teachers joins the strike. Teachers earn less than 100 dollars a month; rural workers live below the line of extreme poverty; public universities are forced to fight each other over reduced resources. The government, meanwhile, is hoping debt relief from the major international banks will provide more funds by the year 2001.

## Master agreement ratified at Bridgestone/Firestone

A majority of the 7,200 Bridgestone/Firestone workers have ratified the master agreement covering seven tire plants in seven states. A strike would have severely pressured the company, which is already reeling from the massive recall of faulty tires that are alleged to have caused 88 deaths and 250 injuries. Workers ratified the agreement at La Vergne, Tennessee by 729-162; at Oklahoma City by 533-178; Akron, Ohio passed 137-11; Decatur, Illinois voted 888-127; and the margin at Des Moines, Iowa was 646-183. Only workers at the Russellville, Arkansas, plant opposed the settlement by 152-65. The ratification is certain even if a plant in Noblesville, Indiana, which has not yet voted on the agreement, should reject the pact.

Two other plants in Morrison, Tennessee and Bloomington, Illinois are covered by separate contracts and will vote later this week. The three-year pact calls for yearly wage increases of 20 cents, 20 cents and 25 cents. A one-time \$200 cash payment will be made to cover retroactive pay to April 23 when the contract expired. Pension benefits are to be hiked from \$34 to \$50 per month per year of service. Retirees will receive an additional \$500 lump sum. What was not disclosed are the benefits Firestone gave the United Steelworkers bureaucracy to prevent a strike at the crisis-ridden company.

## Raytheon workers rally to demand strike settlement

About 200 Raytheon strikers rallied at the Massachusetts state capitol September 14, demanding a settlement to the three-week strike by workers who build the Patriot missile for the US military. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) President

Stanley Lichwala met with Republican Governor Paul Cellucci asking for his intervention in the strike. Outside on the capitol steps, legislators blustered that Raytheon had broken promises made under a 1995 agreement where the state government would fork over tax breaks to the company in exchange for empty pledges that jobs within the state would be preserved.

Since that time the company has added white-collar positions but the ranks of IBEW Local 1505 membership has plummeted from about 10,000 to 2,700. Both the legislators and the IBEW bureaucracy were collaborators in this tax giveback to the company. The 1995 swindle became transparent when following the deal Arthur Osborn, a top Local 1505 officer who played a major role in the negotiations, quit the IBEW and joined Raytheon management as a labor negotiator.

Besides the rally at the capitol, workers also picketed the home of John Deutch, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency and now a member of Raytheon's board of directors.

The lack of job security led workers to reject a four-year contract containing a 14.7 percent wage increase, a small increase in pensions and a \$1,500 bonus. Union and company negotiators continue to hold talks under supervision of a federal mediator.

#### **Teamster reach accord with Earthgrains while bakery workers remain on picket line**

Earthgrains Company, the second largest baker of breads in the US, reached a tentative settlement September 17 with members of the Teamsters union. The five-year pact comes ahead of the September 30 contract expiration and will be put before the union's 735 route sales representatives next weekend.

Meanwhile, mediated talks have been suspended between the company and the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, which has been on strike since August 28. More than 2,000 bakery workers are on strike at 26 different bakeries in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Kentucky, Chicago, Iowa, Mississippi, Texas, California, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas, Illinois and Missouri.

#### **State mediator intervenes in Buffalo teachers dispute**

The Buffalo Teachers Federation has pledged to keep teachers in the classroom at least through September 19, while working with a state mediator to settle the nearly two-week-old dispute that has brought teachers onto the picket lines twice. Local authorities and politicians such as Democratic senatorial candidate Hillary Clinton have denounced the teachers for breaking the state's laws against public employee strikes.

School officials, with the assistance of the media, have claimed the teachers' walkout has left small children stranded on street corners without school buses and without daycare. Paul G. Buchanan, president of the Buffalo Board of Education said: "The BTF, I believe, has already caused educational harm to the children. But, if one single child is physically injured because the BTF is going on strike, I will personally make sure they will be brought to justice to answer to that abuse," Buchanan said.

In the meantime, both sides await Tuesday's proposal by a mediator from the State Public Employment Relations Board. It is likely that the state mediator will order teachers back-to-work. "Hopefully we'll have a settlement by Wednesday and we can put this behind us," BTF President Philip Rumore said.

#### **Saskatchewan teachers to vote on tentative deal**

A province-wide work-to-rule campaign by Saskatchewan's 12,600 teachers has ended after a tentative deal was reached last Friday in Saskatoon between the provincial government-trustee bargaining committee and the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation (STF). The teachers began their job action on September 8 after talks with the provincial government reached a standstill.

Last spring the STF members rejected a tentative contract that offered a 7.2 percent increase in salary, benefits and allowances over the next two years. In June, the teachers voted 91 percent in favor of a job action for the commencement of the school year.

Although the STF is not releasing details of the new proposal until after the ratification vote, unofficial reports indicate that the 32-month deal includes a 4.5 percent salary increase in 2000 retroactive to January 1. This would be followed by a 3 percent increase the following year and a 2 percent increase in the first 8 months of 2002. The proposal also includes increases in benefits and allowances equivalent to two percent of payroll. It has been reported that the STF was seeking a 17.3 percent increase in wages and benefits over the next three years.

While teachers gained considerable support from students across the province, many of whom boycotted classes during the first few days of the job action, pressure had begun to mount as two school divisions of the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association sent notices to teachers stating their pay would be docked. Some teachers might see the new proposal as a considerable improvement over the last offer, but others have indicated that it is still far short of what they need, sighting that in the past decade their wages have fallen 13 percent behind the cost of living.

The ratification vote has been scheduled to take place October 5-6.



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