

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 September 2000

Week of protests in Bolivia

Tens of thousands of workers and peasants carried out a week of strikes and protests last week in Bolivia. At least nine people were injured in the city of Villa Tunari in battles between the police and peasants. The peasants are demanding water rights and the abrogation of a law that makes it easier for big landowners to take possession of land. At the same time urban and rural teachers are locked in an indefinite strike for a \$50 raise (from \$100 to \$150 a month).

Protests are taking place in La Paz, Sucre, Potosi, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and other Bolivian cities. President Hugo Banzer denounced the narco-traffickers for financing the protests by coca farmers. Coca-leaf consumption is legal in Bolivia and ubiquitous, and one of the ways in which citizens in the poorest country in South America cope with hunger.

The Banzer government has threatened teachers that it will close schools for the rest of the year unless they go back to work. Striking teachers and peasants have blocked important roads out of Santa Cruz and Cochabamba, interfering with the movement of fuel trucks and creating a shortage of fuel. On Tuesday, September 19, other unions joined the teachers, forcing the closure of many markets and businesses. Doctors and health workers also declared a strike. Hundreds of retired workers and home renters have joined teachers' protests in La Paz, to press for emergency funds.

Argentine government workers to protest

The association of government workers (ATE) will carry out a torchlight march on Thursday, September 28, in Buenos Aires and a national strike on October 18 to protest budget cuts in state services and wage-cuts that affect government workers. The evening torchlight march will end in a rally at the Congressional building after day-long protests in front of state agencies in Buenos Aires.

Arbitrators settle two-year Kaiser Aluminum strike

An arbitration panel imposed a five-year contract on locked out members of the United Steelworkers (USW) union at Kaiser Aluminum Corporation. Some 2,900 workers at five plants in three states struck Kaiser on September 30, 1998 after the company announced its intention to slash 400 jobs. In December of 1999 the USW offered to return to work and Kaiser responded with a lockout. The company brought in replacement workers to continue its operations.

According to critics of USW lead negotiator David Foster, the union bureaucracy moved to accept binding arbitration last July as the labor dispute began to impact on Kaiser's operations. The five-member arbitration panel sat down to issue binding decisions on six issues over which the two opposing sides could not reach agreement. They accepted the company's position on four and ruled for the union on two. The result of the two-year struggle was that 500 workers will have their jobs axed, 100 more than originally proposed. The final proposal includes a \$1.44 an hour across the board raise. Base wages will increase by up to \$3.42 an hour. A company cap on contributions to health care for retirees was eliminated. A \$12 million pool is to be set up to administer severance and unemployment benefits to those who are terminated. USW official Foster announced his aim is to "quickly restore Kaiser to its former state of profitability."

Judge imposes massive fine after American pilots reject contract

extension

US District Judge Elton "Joe" Kendall ordered the Allied Pilots Association (APA) to pay \$45.5 million in damages to American Airlines for last February's sick-out by AA pilots. The judge's action followed the September 20 rejection by pilots of a tentative agreement to extend the old contract another year, after months of fruitless negotiations between the union and management. About two-thirds of the 8,200 out of 11,000 pilots who voted rejected the agreement, even though ratification would have led to American dropping its multi-million damage claims against the union. After the judge's ruling a spokesman for American reiterated that the company would drop their lawsuit if a contract was ratified.

The judge's decision stems from a 10-day job action by thousands of American pilots against contract violations and the outsourcing of jobs to American's low-cost affiliate Reno Air. The sick-out got out of the control of the APA leadership and crippled the country's second-largest airline, forcing American to cancel 6,000 flights and disrupt travel for 600,000 passengers. In the course of the job action, rank-and-file pilots defied Kendall's back-to-work order.

No strike action is expected because the present contract does not expire until August of 2001. The tentative agreement would have extended the labor agreement for an additional year to 2002. But the possibility of getting the contract ratified collapsed in the wake of the industry-leading contract achieved by pilots at United Airlines. One industry expert pointed out that compensation for American pilots who fly narrow-body carriers would be one-third of that which their counterparts at United will receive under their new agreement.

Union officials face jail sentences for Buffalo teachers strike

Three leaders of the Buffalo teachers union pled guilty Friday, September 22, to violating a judge's order barring them from calling a strike. President Philip Rumore, vice president Edith LeWin and secretary Barbara Bielecki could get up to 30 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines at sentencing September 29. Teachers in the 47,000-student district walked off the job September 7 and again September 14 in defiance of the state's Taylor law, which prohibits public employees from striking.

At a mass meeting of 4,000 teachers on Friday union members ratified a five-year contract by a unanimous voice vote. Rumore and the Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) executive committee recommended the pact, which was put together by officials of the Public Employee's Relation Board (PERB) and presented to the Board of Education. While many teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the deal, they reluctantly supported it especially since the union offered no strategy to defeat the attack of the school authorities, the courts and big business politicians.

The school board apparently retreated on some of their more regressive demands including the elimination of protections against the indiscriminate firing of temporary and probationary teachers and the demand for increased control by principals over the work day. The agreement provides some increased funding for supplies—from one dollar per pupil to two, then five dollars. The deal also reportedly will lead to a gradual phasing in of music, art, and physical education classes for second and third graders who lost their programs due to earlier budget cuts.

At the same time, the school authorities won their demand to subcontract with social service agencies to provide students psychological

and other counseling services. Teachers will receive no raise for the past year that they have been working without a new contract. Over the next four years wages will be raised by 14.3 percent. Retirees will be forced to pay increased medical premiums and medical co-payments will increase for all teachers. New hires will be mandated to attend a two-day orientation with no pay, while current employees would be compensated.

California health care workers strike

Hundreds of Sacramento County health care workers walked off the job September 18 after rejecting the latest offer by government negotiators. Some three-quarters of the 550 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 146 struck six different facilities including jails, juvenile halls, a mental health facility and the pharmacy primary care facility.

Pharmacists, nurses, nutritionists and other workers rejected the county's proposal for wage increases of eight to 11 percent during the course of a three-year pact as too little to raise their living standards to what they call a fair market wage. AFSCME wants the wage proposal increased by five percent but so far county management has refused. Increases in workers share of health insurance costs further undermine the overall compensation package.

Conductors and engineers reach tentative agreement with railway freight carriers

Thirty of the largest railroad freight carriers and the United Transportation Union (UTU) reached a tentative agreement September 21, covering 45,000 conductors and engineers. Details of the new contract have not been made available. Under the old agreement engineers and conductors made between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year. The contract is not a master agreement as workers' wages can differ from one company to the next. The agreement is the first to be reached between the employers' National Railway Conference and 13 railway unions.

Contract averts strike at Denver airport

Union and management officials at Denver International Airport narrowly averted a strike by technicians who operate United Airlines' automated baggage system by reaching a tentative agreement just before a midnight September 21 strike deadline.

The 90 workers had already rejected an earlier contract proposal in August by Phelps Program Management, which operates the baggage system for United. United could conceivably get around a strike but this would require the company to use its own ramp workers to move the luggage. Apparently there was little inclination by United's 5,000 ground workers at the Denver airport to cooperate with the company. Sentiment for honoring picket lines was deep enough to cause the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to issue a statement declaring it would "honor and support" any picket line by the baggage technicians.

United's mechanics and other ground workers recently voted to petition the National Labor Relations Board for an election to decertify the IAM and switch to another union.

Recently United reached a tentative agreement with its pilot's union that achieved an industry-leading contract. This has encouraged flight attendants, whose union meets with company negotiators this week, to ask for a contract that similarly places them in an industry-leading position with attendants at other carriers.

Washington DC nurses strike over wages

Registered nurses struck Washington Hospital Center in the nation's capital September 20, demanding higher wages. The 1,500 nurses say the hospital's proposal of a 16.5 percent wage increase over the life of the three-year agreement fails to raise them to a competitive level with other nurses. The DC Nurses Association, which represents the strikers, has put forward the demand for wage increases ranging from 22 to 28 percent. Nurses are also seeking representation on the hospital's patient care committees. Hospital management responded to the strike by contracting to bring in 500 nurses in an effort to keep the 907-bed complex—the city's

largest—open.

Earthgrains bakery strike settled

Workers at Earthgrains bakery in Fort Payne, Alabama, ratified a new agreement September 23 that brings to an end a national strike by 4,000 members of the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union at 26 plants in 15 states. The Fort Payne plant contract will serve as a pattern agreement for negotiations with plants in southeastern United States, including Atlanta, Memphis, Chattanooga and Nashville. Wage and benefit increases in the new pact will average out to 3.9 percent for each year of the three-year agreement. An additional paid holiday was also added. Workers initially struck Earthgrains, the second largest baker of breads in the US, on August 26.

Ontario truckers protest winding down

After angry truckers threatened to blockade the province's oil refineries and major truck routes if they did not win concessions on fuel prices and mileage rates, Ontario Economic Development Minister Al Palladini has promised that fuel surcharges will be voluntarily passed down from the companies using their services. Bill Wellman, president of the National Truckers Association, which represents some 1,700 independent truckers, most of who are in Ontario, has endorsed the surcharge plan calling it a "significant step forward" and urged the truckers to return to work while the agreement is being worked out. The automotive industry is the major contractor for independent truckers. Meanwhile manufacturers are complaining that this action simply transfers the costs from one sector of the economy to another and will result in job cuts, as companies reduce costs to remain competitive.

Similar to other truckers on an international scale, Ontario truckers have faced a 75-per-cent increase in fuel prices over the last year. But neither the federal Liberal government, nor the Ontario Tory government have taken any steps to reduce the exorbitant taxes on fuel. For example, in Ontario the average gas price per liter is now 72.1 cents, of which 29.4 cents are taxes shared equally between the federal and provincial governments. Both governments have been unwilling to budge on this issue.

Striking miners in Sudbury receive support from Norwegian workers

Workers at the Falconbridge Ltd. refinery in Norway have threatened to stop processing raw material sent from the company's mining facility in Sudbury, Ontario, where nickel workers are entering their ninth week of strike action. The 1,260 members of Mine Mill / Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in Sudbury, have been on strike since August 1, when their three-year contract expired and talks came to a standstill.

On September 5, the company's latest proposal to settle the dispute was rejected by the CAW with the union accusing the management of reducing its offer. Contracting out, seniority and provisions for overtime are some of the major issues. The union bureaucracy is particularly concerned about Falconbridge's attempt to reduce the number of company-paid union representatives at the Sudbury mine as well as reducing the number of senior union executives by half.

Since the strike began in Sudbury, the refinery in Kristiansand, Norway, which produced a record 74,100 tons of nickel and 4,000 tons of cobalt last year, has been operating at 60 per cent capacity.

While there is support among rank-and-file miners for their Canadian counterparts, the Norwegian Union for Chemical Industry Workers, which represents the majority of the workers at the Kristiansand refinery, said it would take time to work through the labor laws before any solidarity action could be conducted.



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