

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 October 2000

General strike in Honduras

The Honduran Workers Federation (CTH) organized a general strike on Monday, October 2 that is expected to involve nearly 200,000 workers and close the nation's roads and other commerce. The unions are demanding a minimum monthly raise of \$33, increases in employers' contributions to Social Security and an improvement in basic services such as health care. The CTH rejected a government offer of \$23 earlier. The current monthly minimum wage is between \$70 and \$116. The leaders of other labor federations, the CGT (General Workers Federation) and the CUTH (Unified Federation of Honduran Workers), both accepted the government's offer.

Argentine workers to demonstrate

Workers who are members of the "combative" section of the General Labor Federation (CGT) will march on Plaza de Mayo, across from Argentina's presidential office, on October 11 to protest the policies of the De la Rúa government. Hugo Moyano, leader of the union faction, warned of social uprisings in Argentina unless the government addresses workers' demands. This CGT faction also threatened other actions, such as the permanent occupation of Plaza de Mayo.

Moyano's announcement occurred as thousands of small truck owner-operators were blocking Argentina's major highways to protest the high price of fuel. The protest had a serious impact on the Liniers market, the destination of thousands of head of cattle.

A recent report from the University of Buenos Aires noted that over the last five years real wages have fallen by as much as 44 percent in greater Buenos Aires for the poorest 75 percent of working households.

Workers and military forces clash in Bolivia

A violent confrontation September 30 between military forces and workers blocking the Cochabamba-Oruro highway in Vinto, southeast of La Paz, left one worker dead and 24 wounded. Twenty-five-year-old taxi driver Vicente Espinoza Rodriguez is the tenth victim killed during the wave of protests and strikes that has paralyzed Bolivia over the last two weeks. Teachers, health care workers, rural workers and peasants are protesting the IMF-imposed policies of the Banzer government.

In Vinto, the military used live ammunition against the workers, according to eyewitnesses. Eyewitnesses said soldiers were firing at will against any "blockade suspect" during their seven-hour attempt to break through the barricades. The victims described the military assault as "barbaric" and "savage." There were no firearms among the strikers.

Two days earlier three strikers were killed in the high mountain region of Huarina. The victims were two peasants, Cirilio Choque Huanca and Toribio Chui, and rural school teacher Joaquin Morales. Four others were injured.

In the oil center of Santa Cruz over 400 teachers and peasants marched in protests and confronted the police. Student teachers, teachers and peasants also marched into Santa Cruz from Montero, 50 kilometers to the north.

President Hugo Banzer has accused the workers and peasants of sedition and threatened to deal with them harshly. So far the government has not been able to suppress the protests. The Bolivian economy is in a state of collapse. Over 70 percent of the population of Bolivia live in poverty.

Union activist assassinated in Colombia

Omar de Jesus Noguera, an activist in the Municipal Employees Union of Cali (SINTRAEMCALI), was assassinated on September 19 by two heavily armed men. Noguera was a worker in the water and sewer agency of Cali. He was known as a whistle-blower and campaigner against plans to privatize the utility. Last month, SINTREMECALI President Alexander Lopez Maya was forced to leave the country because of repeated death threats.

So far this year, paramilitary forces—that are linked to the military and operate with impunity in the Cali region—have killed fourteen workers, four of them SINTRAEMCALI members. The latter had been involved in exposing the corruption and illegal enrichment of municipal authorities involved in the privatization of the water and sewage agency.

Chilean workers to strike

Truckers, longshore workers, newspaper reporters, teachers, and health workers are poised to strike in Chile in October. The workers, members of the United Workers Federation (CUT), are demanding more money for social programs. Together with the longshore workers, the CUT members are demanding higher wages. Meanwhile 12,000 truck owner-operators are threatening to barricade roads to protest high fuel prices.

The strike threat takes place as the government of Ricardo Lagos is being shaken by revelations that the former executive of government firms privatized during the last administration obtained millions of dollars in compensation.

Union president jailed for Buffalo, New York teachers strike

A New York State judge sentenced the president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) to 15 days in jail September 29 for defying the Taylor law against public employee strikes. Last month 3,800 teachers walked out on two separate occasions to oppose regressive demands by school authorities, including increased medical co-payments and the erosion of job security. State Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dillion ordered Philip Rumore incarcerated at the Alden Correctional Facility and fined him \$1,000 for violating the state law. Two other executive committee officials were also fined \$1,000. Anthony Masiello, the city's Democratic mayor, endorsed the judge's action. During the strike US senatorial candidate Hillary Clinton also denounced the teachers for breaking the law.

Denver airport workers strike hobbled by machinists union

Sixty-eight members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) who operate an automated baggage system at Denver International Airport walked off the job September 26 after rejecting management's last contract offer.

Phelps Program Management, which runs the baggage system on behalf of United Airlines, used management personnel to maintain operations. Airport management initially feared that United's 4,500 ground workers, who are also members of the IAM, would launch a sympathy strike on behalf of the baggage operators.

But on the first day of the strike the IAM bureaucracy forced workers to set up picket lines in a remote overflow parking lot not used by United's ground workers in order to circumvent any honoring of the strikers' picket lines. An IAM spokesman claimed the union had been "tricked" by city officials who issued the permit specifying the remote parking lot, and said it was considering an appeal to allow picketing closer to the terminal.

IAM chairman Harold Johannesen met with Denver Mayor Wellington Webb on the first day of the strike without obtaining a change in location of the picket line. "We had a nice talk with the mayor," said Johannesen. "He's very interested in our problems." The IAM bureaucracy is under fire by United mechanics who successfully petitioned to hold an election to decertify the union and join the rival Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association.

Defense workers at Raytheon vote on tentative agreement

Striking defense workers at the Raytheon Company in Massachusetts will vote on a tentative agreement October 2 after a month on the picket line. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1505 and company management concluded negotiations at the end of last week on a four-year contract, but have refused to reveal any details pending the ratification vote.

Raytheon initially offered the 2,700 workers, who make the Patriot missile for the US Department of Defense, a four-year contract that contained a 14.7 percent wage increase, a \$1,500 bonus and some pension increases. Workers were seeking improvements in health benefits. But purely economic issues have failed to mask workers' job security concerns. The local has gone from 10,000 workers in the early 1990s to less than 3,000 today. The emergence of new negotiations, which got under way September 28, led the IBEW to call off a rally scheduled for Saturday in anticipation of progress in talks.

Flight attendants call for United Airlines to reopen contract

United Airlines management is coming under further pressure from its flight attendants for higher wages in the wake of a contract settlement with pilots that granted an industry-leading contract. The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), representing 25,000 attendants at United, has called on the airline to open negotiations five years before the expiration of the present 10-year contract and grant an immediate raise that would place them 5 percent above the industry's highest compensation for flight attendants.

The AFA contract is set to expire in 2006. The AFA hopes to reopen official talks in December of 2001 and indicated it would take "any lawful action" to pressure the airlines into talks. This could include slowdowns, sick-outs and the refusal to work overtime—a tactic that pilots used to extract concessions from management. The union made clear that no actions will be implemented in the near future and indicated satisfaction with discussions over non-wage topics last week. A second meeting over wage issues will take place October 2.

Los Angeles teachers authorize strike

United Teachers Los Angeles, the union representing 43,000 teachers and school staff workers in the nation's second-largest school district, announced September 28 that the membership had voted to authorize the union to call a strike if the district fails to come up with an acceptable contract. An overwhelming 95 percent of the workers who voted supported a walkout.

Teachers, librarians, counselors and nurses are pressing for a 15 percent one-year pay raise. The district is offering increases of 16.8 to 21.8 percent spread out over three years. The union is also putting forward a "classroom bill of rights" that calls for clean classrooms and sufficient supplies and textbooks.

Study exposes auditing firm concealed sweatshop conditions

An MIT professor issued a report supporting longstanding allegations that the largest of the global auditing firms that inspect working conditions in overseas factories is biased towards management.

Professor Dana O'Rourke detailed the failure of PricewaterhouseCoopers to acknowledge the use of carcinogenic chemicals, forced overtime leading to 80-hour workweeks and falsification of timecards. Corporate suppression of unionization and collective bargaining rights along with disregard for health and safety issues were also virtually ignored. Pricewaterhouse disguised the fact that

certain unions were in reality company-controlled organizations and the firm relied on management officials for the bulk of its information.

Following these criticisms, Pricewaterhouse issued a statement claiming it did "very good work" but was guilty of some oversights. The firm inspects 6,000 factories a year for firms such as Nike that are notorious for profiting from sweatshop conditions.

For his study O'Rourke reviewed 100 of the factories. In one example he points out Pricewaterhouse recorded workers in a Shanghai factory as working 50 to 60 hours a week. Reviewing the same timecards O'Rourke found one employee worked 316.5 hours in a month for an average 79 hours a week, including 20 consecutive days of work without a day off.

Vancouver city workers walk out

About 400 pickets were set up outside Vancouver City Hall September 27 on the first day of a strike by 2,500 members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 15.

The strike started after talks reached a deadlock over scheduling. Local 15, which represents parks and other municipal agency workers, wants to restore a provision for flexible work weeks. Two years ago the city canceled a 22-year program that allowed workers to put in longer days in exchange for a day off every one or two weeks.

By the weekend other CUPE locals, including electricians and outside workers, walked out in a sign of solidarity. All city operations have been shut down except for those kept open by a skeletal staff of 400 nonunion employees. Services deemed as essential, such as police, fire and senior citizen homes, are still in operation. One worker said, "I'm so mad at them ... I'm willing to be out for six months".

Vancouver meat processing company locks out workers

It has been six weeks since 400 meat workers were locked out by the Premium Brands meat processing plant for refusing to accept wage cuts and restrictions on washroom breaks. Two days after the lockout on August 19 the company put out a press release stating that it wanted to lower the wages for nonspecialized workers from \$16.50 to \$10, adding that the lower wages are similar to those at its major competitors. Premium Brands has also demanded the right to dock the pay of workers who spend more than 20 minutes a week in the washroom. This amounts to less than four minutes a day in a five-day week.

The company claims that the workers were locked out because the plant could not compete under the terms of the old contract. Premium Brands, which until June was formerly known as Fletcher's Fine Foods, has been in the food processing business since 1917 and has plants in five provinces and in two US states.



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