

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 October 2000

Venezuelan oil workers strike for five days

On October 13 Venezuela's oil workers struck for five days before President Hugo Chavez intervened to end the strike by acceding to some of the workers' wage demands. The country's two major oil workers unions, Fedepetrol and Petrahidrocarburos, lowered their wage demands to an increase of 6,500 bolivares (\$9.40) a day from 12,000 bolivares.

Talks were suspended last March and in protest Fedepetrol staged two strikes this year. The five-day job action created a national gasoline shortage which was used as the pretext for the president's intervention. Chavez fired Héctor Ciavaldini, president of PdVSA, and announced that other executives would also be removed. The president then appointed Guaicapuro Lameda Montero, an army general, to replace Ciavaldini who was criticized for mishandling labor negotiations.

Peruvian peasant protest

On October 10 about a million agricultural workers and peasants launched a 48-hour strike to demand the government resume the import of fertilizers and grant credit to small producers. The protesters indicated that half of Peru's arable land lies fallow due to a lack of seed, credits and equipment. Three million of Peru's rural population lives in extreme poverty. Thirty thousand children die of malnutrition each year.

Bolivian protests end

Barricades were lifted last week throughout most of Bolivia following three weeks of protests by coca farmers and teachers. The consumption of coca leaves is a legal custom in the country. Hugo Banzer's government reached an agreement with producers to abolish to restore their water rights. The government also reached an agreement with the teachers unions.

Screen Actors strike drags on

Unions representing 135,000 striking commercial actors are appealing to Democratic and Republican politicians to help resolve issues involving compensation for Internet ads. The move is the latest ploy from the AFL-CIO, which has left the actors isolated as the strike drags into its seventh month.

Officials from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) recently met with Orrin Hatch, the right-wing Republican senator from Utah, and various representatives close to the AFL-CIO such as Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and John Dingel (D-Mich.). The union officials have also launched various boycotts of major US companies that continue to produce advertisements with nonunion actors.

Some union officials admit they are looking to obtain advertisers' agreement to monitor the Internet's development and adjust compensation accordingly in the future. Union officials report that in the last round of talks negotiators for the advertising industry withdrew their demand to pay actors a one-time fee and abolish

residuals, a 50-year-old pay system which compensates actors each time a commercial is aired on network television. The proposal was estimated to have resulted in a 50 percent wage cut for many commercial actors. The union is reportedly holding out for a compromise in the cable television sector where actors presently receive a one-time fee.

Bargaining resumes after AFL-CIO calls off Los Angeles county workers strike

Union officials have returned to the bargaining table after shutting down a strike by more than 40,000 Los Angeles County workers only one day after launching a so-called indefinite general strike on October 11. County workers are bitter over not having received raises the last four years. Hospital and clinic workers also oppose staffing shortages, which have led to heavier workloads and a deterioration of patient care. County workers are also calling for free medical care and day care.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 660 began rolling strikes October 2 to target individual services. Libraries, county offices, public works and hospitals were shut down in rotating order. The strike was called off following an intervention by top AFL-CIO officials anxious to prevent a common struggle by county employees and transit workers, now on strike for more than a month.

Tentative agreement in Maine shipyard strike

Negotiators for Maine's defense contractor Bath Iron Works and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) have reached a mediated agreement in the seven-week strike by 4,800 shipyard workers who build the Aegis destroyer for the US Navy.

The new three-year contract offers wage increases of 4 percent, 4.5 percent and 5 percent. The deal also reportedly reduces health care premiums by up to 50 percent, resulting in \$400 to \$500 savings for each worker in the first year of the contract. The company also backed away from the most controversial proposal, a cross-training measure, which workers feared would facilitate layoffs.

Union members are expected to vote on the tentative agreement October 22. Workers have already rejected two contract proposals sanctioned by management and the IAM's negotiating committee. Past agreements offered wage increases of 4, 3.5 and 4 percent, about half of what union members want. Workers originally voted by an 85 percent margin to walk off the job on August 27.

New talks in Washington DC nurses strike

Negotiators for striking nurses and the Washington Hospital Center in the nation's capital resumed contract talks October 11 as the strike by 1,500 nurses entered its third week. The striking members of the DC Nurses Association originally rejected management's proposal for a 16 percent wage increase on the grounds it failed to raise them to a competitive level with other registered nurses. The union asked for raises ranging from 22 to 28 percent along with representation on the hospital's patient care committees.

The union claims both sides are close on salary issues but mandatory

overtime and understaffing questions are unresolved. Hospital negotiators deny any progress charging the two sides are \$10 million apart on salary and benefit issues. Management has contracted to bring in 500 nurses in an effort to keep the 907-bed complex open and break the strike.

Strike by California newspaper ends

Newspaper carriers for the *San Jose Mercury News* in California ended their six-day strike October 13 after the paper's publisher agreed to their demand for the rehiring of four fired carriers. The walkout began October 7 when a section of the 1,080 contract carriers walked out demanding a 20 percent pay increase to compensate for increased fuel costs. Carriers also raised concerns over production delays that upset their schedules, problems with bill collections for which carriers were penalized, and poor communication and disrespect by management toward the 80 percent of the paper's carriers who are Vietnamese-Americans.

On the second day of the strike the paper's publisher Jay Harris offered a miserly raise, but the walkout continued to mushroom. The following day he offered a 12 percent wage increase, but striking carriers refused to return to work until four of their coworkers were rehired and management promised to refrain from any further reprisals against strikers.

The strike continued to widen, ultimately encompassing 582 carriers. Harris howled about violence and intimidation against other carriers, but *Mercury News* reporters covering the strike could find no cases of sabotage or harassment. With 67,000 of the papers 270,000 weekly subscribers not receiving the *Mercury News* and possible threats that advertisers would demand rebates, Harris agreed to rehire the fired workers and promised that no strikers would be victimized by management. The 12 percent salary increase raises the monthly commission for a typical 250-paper route from \$1,080 to \$1,210.

The *San Jose Mercury News* is a prominent paper located in the heart of California's computer and software industry, where the gulf between rich and poor is one of the sharpest in the US.

Strike at Goodyear plant in Texas

More than 350 members of Operating Engineers Local 347 went on strike October 10 at the Goodyear Tire & Rubber plant in Houston, Texas to protest job cuts. Goodyear is preparing to slash the jobs of 139 workers and replace them with contract workers

The union has offered to reduce pay rates for the targeted jobs by 25 percent, but the company is moving ahead with its plans to replace union workers making \$20 an hour with contract workers earning \$10 to \$12 an hour. The Houston chemical plant is Goodyear's only producer of the emulsion styrene butadiene rubber, the raw material used to fabricate tires, belts and hoses. The conflict comes at a time when Goodyear's North American tire division is planning to increase production of its P235/75R15 tire by 500 percent as a result of rival Firestone's recall problems.

Phoenix bus drivers strike

Phoenix bus drivers set up picket lines October 14 after rejecting a five-year contract offer from transit authorities. The 540 members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1433 voted by an 81 percent margin against the agreement, which included a 25 percent wage offer. Drivers charge that the proposal did not address their concerns over working conditions and health insurance. The strike affects 110,000 daily commuters.

Ontario independent truckers begin strike

About 300 members of the National Truckers Association in Ontario unanimously voted October 15 to take whatever measures are

necessary to decrease the fuel costs that have reduced their earnings by up to 24 percent. Later that evening in Oshawa, independent truckers, many of whom carry goods including groceries, lumber, automotive parts and steel, began blockading major trucking depots. The truckers threatened to shut down General Motors and other major industries in the province if no headway was made in defraying their fuel expense increases.

Ontario's Economic Minister Al Palladini has incorporated a fuel surcharge into contracts the government has with the Ontario Road Builders Association, in hopes that other businesses would follow suit. However, little progress has been made in getting industry to do so. Dwayne Mosley, general manager of the Greater Ottawa Truckers Association and the Northern Ontario Truckers Association, said only truckers who do business with the province would benefit. According to Wosley, the Ontario government must regulate industry to pass down a 24 percent fuel surcharge to truckers that use their services, pointing out that the Big Three automakers have volunteered to pass down only 6 to 8 percent to truckers.

Meanwhile the work stoppage has been having a domino effect as about 20 Durham region farmers formed a separate convoy along Oshawa's city streets in solidarity with the truckers. The farmers are protesting both the exorbitant prices of fuel as well as the low prices for their crops, two problems which they say will soon bankrupt them. The protest is expected to spread to northern Ontario and Ottawa.

Vancouver public employees stay off the job despite new contract

Despite ratification of their new contract, Vancouver's 1,700 workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1004, have vowed to stay off the job to honor the continuing strike of other public employees. The 2,500 parks and inside (office) workers, members of CUPE Local 15, have been on strike since September 27, after the Vancouver city council rejected their union's latest contract proposal. Local 15 members are striking in an attempt to regain a 22-year-old program that allowed for more flexibility in work schedules. The city is demanding the elimination of union approval for the scheduling of new employees, a move that would undermine the union's bargaining leverage.



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