

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 November 2000

Taxi drivers strike in Rio de Janeiro

On November 24, Rio de Janeiro Taxi drivers struck and blocked major arteries in the Brazilian city for 5 hours, causing a massive traffic jam that affected nearly 1.3 million motorists during the morning rush hour. The city's police towed over 170 cabs in an effort to clear the avenues. The *Diarias Nunca Mais* (no more daily rates) movement (DNM) led the strike. The DNM is demanding relief from the high daily lease rates charged by the owners. The drivers demanded that they be allowed to work independently of the cab owners.

The DNM strikers point out that the daily lease rates force them to work very long hours to cover the lease and make a living wage. "We work 16 hours a day and give everything we earn to the owner," said DNM leader Joao Batista Faria Gamas. The night before the job action representatives of the bank workers union, retail workers, electric workers and oil workers voted to support the DNM strike.

Sao Paulo workers to mobilize against bank privatization

On November 24 the state leader of the Central Labor Federation (CUT), Antonio Carlos Spis, announced that the unions were preparing protest demonstrations against the privatization of Cesp Parana, a credit agency that is a popular source of small loans in Brazil. The sale of Cesp is to take place on December 6. According to Spis, protest marches and rallies will take place in the cities of Sao Paulo, Jupia, Ilha Solteira and Porto Primavera.

Brazilian workers march to demand a higher minimum wage

On November 21 marchers arrived in the Brazilian capital of Brazilia, ending a 1100-kilometer protest that began a month earlier in Sao Paulo. They are demanding a higher minimum wage. The march involved 180 representatives of unions in Brazil's second largest labor federation, Forca Sindical (FS). The current minimum is US\$79. FS is demanding that it be raised to US\$95. The FS is also demanding that future minimum wage increases be indexed to inflation. Over 23 million workers in Brazil earn the minimum wage.

Nicaraguan teachers go without pay in Puerto Cabezas

About 180 teachers that work in the North Atlantic region of Nicaragua complain that they are not being paid on time. Fearing victimization the teachers spoke to the Nicaraguan *La Prensa* newspaper on condition that their names not be published. The teachers pointed out that, though they were contracted in March, their first paycheck was in April. The government admits that this is the case but claims that a lack of funds has prevented it from paying the educators.

Most of these teachers are considered to have no credentials, with some making as little as 600 Cordobas a month (about 45 US dollars). "We are demanding that the regional government pay us. We fear running out of money, particularly since Christmas is coming," declared a teacher.

The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua is one of the most impoverished regions of Latin America.

Panamanian teachers protest

Hundreds of teachers in Panama marched on the Legislative Assembly on November 24 in Panama City to demand that the government approve new retirement legislation. The teachers indicate that the draft legislation is a matter of solidarity and social justice. Many teachers reach retirement age (52 in Panama for women, 56 for men) without enough contributions

to the Social Security fund. The new law provides a minimum retirement wage and improves the formula that is used to determine retirement earnings for all teachers. The teachers are demanding that the law be passed on December 1, Teachers Day in Panama.

Court employees on strike in Paraguay

Judicial employees in Paraguay have been on strike since November 22. The strike has paralyzed birth and automobile registrations, as well as trial hearings. The strike is expected to continue next week. On Friday, court workers rallied in front of the National Congress in Asuncion. The workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase and the restoration of 156,000 million guaranies that were cut from the judicial budget.

Peruvian telephone workers on strike

On November 24, 2,600 Peruvian telephone workers marked the tenth day of their strike to demand the rescinding of 400 layoffs. The decision to strike came in response to the company's decision to systematically sack every employee with more than 12 year's seniority, which includes all those who worked before the privatization of the company. Currently there are 4,000 telephone workers in Peru. The company intends to sack them all and replace them with workers provided by private temporary labor contractors. The Peruvian Labor Federation (CGTP) declared itself in solidarity with the telephone workers but stopped short of expanding the strike to other sections of the labor movement. Instead it suggested sending a letter to the Ministry of Labor to demand that the firings stop.

Uruguayan workers take over public health facilities

On November 24 psychiatric health workers occupied the Santin Carlos Rossi clinic in the department of San Jose in Uruguay, following the example set by the health workers union in Vilardebo Hospital. Workers are opposing planned budget cuts by the Public Health Ministry (MSP). MSP officials tried to downplay the job action, declaring that negotiations continue to take place between the ministry and the Federation of Public Health Functionaries (FFSP). For the time being the MSP indicated that it does not plan to evict the workers. Workers at the Etchepare, another public psychiatric clinic, are considering similar actions.

The Vilardebo workers have been on strike since November 13, providing only emergency care. The Carlos Rossi clinic has 488 patients and 300 employees. During the occupation patient care will continue as usual. The workers are protesting proposed cuts in the national budget for psychiatric care by the government of President Jorge Batlle. The FFSP maintains that, while some progress has been made, the strike at Vilalderbo will continue indefinitely. On Wednesday, November 29 the workers at Vilalderbo will meet to decide whether or not to shut down the hospital completely.

Seattle newspaper workers strike

Members of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild struck early November 21 after talks with the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* broke down and workers rejected a mediator's call for a two-day extension. The negotiations, covering about 1,000 news, advertising, circulation and business department employees at the two papers, deadlocked over wages. The newspapers held to the offer of a \$3.30 increase over the life of a six-year contract. The Guild initially called for a \$6.15 wage boost over three years, then lowered the demand to \$3.25 over the same period. H. Mason Sizemore, president and chief operating officer

of the *Seattle Times*, sounded a warning that the publishers are determined to smash the strike, saying, "I don't see the ingredients for a quick solution.... A final offer is a final offer, and we have since removed that offer from the table."

The *Times* has boarded up windows on its building and constructed an eight-foot chain link fence around the premises. Temporary workers have been hired and other newspapers have loaned staff to ensure the paper can be brought out. The *Post-Intelligencer*, a Hearst-owned paper, has received reinforcements from other papers owned by the parent enterprise. Roger Oglesby, the paper's editor and publisher, intimated that "at some point, we will start advertising for replacement workers."

That the strike could quickly polarize the city is also indicated by the decision of Seattle's Democratic Mayor Paul Schell to order city employees to refrain from granting interviews to strike-breaking employees filling in at the two papers. Interviews would only be given to striking employees working for the Guild's strike paper. The attempt by the mayor to pose as a friend of the strikers comes in the wake of the region's strike by 20,000 engineers at Boeing and growing sentiments among workers in the computer and Internet industry to unionize. But there can be no doubt that the courts and police will fundamentally uphold the interests of the newspaper's owners.

Northwest Airlines seeks fine for mechanics defiance of court order

Northwest Airlines returned November 22 to a US District Court in Minneapolis, Minnesota to obtain a fine against the union representing the airline's 9,500 mechanics. The move stems from an alleged slowdown resulting from a four-year contract dispute. Two days earlier the court issued a temporary restraining order against the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), ordering the union to bar its members from a work slowdown.

AMFA has been negotiating with Northwest for about a year. But the contract expired in October 1996 when mechanics were represented by the International Association of Machinists. The IAM negotiated for two years and then attempted to foist a standard agreement on the ranks. Mechanics reacted by dumping the IAM and voting in AMFA.

While Northwest and AMFA have concluded an agreement on work rules, the two sides remain far apart on wages. On November 2 the National Mediation Board (NMB) broke off talks and instructed AMFA to make concessions. AMFA criticized the NMB for the breaking off of talks as an abdication of its responsibility and asked for a 30-day cooling-off period after which it could strike Northwest.

Arguing before District Court Judge David Doty, Northwest accused mechanics of barring planes from taking off by ordering unnecessary repairs. Northwest admitted that mechanics have the right to refuse overtime, but they claimed the recent mass refusals constituted a "deliberate and organized job action orchestrated by AMFA's leadership" in defiance of the judge's order.

AMFA attorney Lee Seham called NWA's statistics on flight cancellations "unfounded voodoo" and compared NWA's appeal for a fine as an attempt to destroy the union, similar to American Airlines' \$45 million fine against its pilots for a sick-out. He told Doty that workers are "frustrated," commenting, "It's a powder keg."

United, mechanics union return to court over slowdown

United Airlines and representatives for its union mechanics are scheduled to appear November 27 before a US District Court Judge in Chicago as the company presses to use a temporary restraining order to stop alleged slowdowns by its workers over a new contract.

The court order was initially granted November 17 after United complained that members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) were forcing planes to be grounded for unnecessary maintenance causing flight cancellations. But according to United, cancellations continued to mushroom, reaching 121 on November 20, of which 80 were maintenance-related. By the time union and company attorneys met before

the judge on November 22 the figure for maintenance-related cancellations had dropped to 43.

The IAM asked the National Mediation Board (NMB) to declare an impasse in the year-old talks. A 30-day cooling-off period must follow before either side could legally carry out a strike or lockout. United also threatened its flight attendants union with a lawsuit if it violated the National Railway Labor Act. The flight attendants have been leafleting customers explaining their demand for a midterm wage increase. United's 25,000 flight attendants are laboring under a 10-year contract that does not expire until 2006.

Los Angeles garment workers sue for stolen wages

Twelve garment workers filed suit against XOXO Clothing Company in a US District Court in Los Angeles. They are charging a labor contractor for the apparel manufacturer refused to pay wages owed to them. Martinez & Sons Sportswear, the contractor named in the suit, denied wages to the workers for a six-week period during which they toiled six days a week. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center, which filed the suit on behalf of the workers, is seeking \$50,000 from XOXO to compensate for wages and damages. According to the suit, XOXO has repeatedly hired contractors who cheat workers out of their wages. The Labor Department has issued citations against the company on six different occasions since 1991 for violations of the wage-and-hour law.

Study finds farm workers subject to poor nutrition, lack medical care

A study released by the California Institute for Rural Studies documents the "startlingly high" risk to chronic illnesses by the nation's one million farm workers and points to poor nutrition as a cause. In the most comprehensive study to date, 971 farm workers were given physical examinations, chemical analyses and interviews. Information revealed that both young men and women suffer more than twice the rate of high blood pressure compared to other US adults; male workers had higher rates of serum cholesterol than expected; 81 percent of men and 76 percent of women were overweight; 28 percent of men and 37 percent of women were categorized as obese compared to the rest of the nation.

These problems—obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure—are major contributing factors for heart disease, stroke, gall bladder disease and diabetes. The control group was also found to suffer higher rates of anemia and dental disease. The study attributed the health problems to poor nutrition and inadequate access to medical care. One third of the men reported never having seen a doctor during the course of their lives. Half of the men and two-fifths of the women had never been to a dentist. Some 70 percent of the workers are without health insurance.

Nine out of ten of the workers were foreign born and a good number of these lack citizenship or residency documentation. A majority have less than a sixth grade education, while 5 percent were found to be unable to read English competently. The average worker makes less than \$10,000 per year. Only half of the workers reported having pesticide safety training.

Tories order Hamilton teachers back to work

The three-week-old lockout against public elementary school teachers in the southern Ontario region of Hamilton-Wentworth ended last week when the provincial Tory government introduced legislation returning them to work. The government intervention comes as a warning to teachers across the province who are pitted against school boards in contract negotiations where the only choice offered is between effective wage reductions and mass layoffs.

The 2,300 teachers had begun rotating strike action when the school board locked them out October 30. Disputed issues of wage increases and job security center on restrictions imposed by the province's funding formula on school boards, many of which are still negotiating contracts which expired at the end of August. Currently, half of the province's public high school teachers and a third of all elementary teachers are

without contracts.

The law ending the lockout forces Hamilton teachers to vote on the board's latest offer and provides for binding arbitration should it be rejected. The bill was given unanimous support in the legislature after some initial posturing by one New Democratic Party member of the provincial parliament and is seen as a warning signal to other bargaining units that may be considering strike action.

Among the most important battles gearing up between teachers and school boards across the province is that of 11,000 public elementary teachers in Toronto, who voted last week in favor of strike action. In addition, a number of other bargaining units in the Toronto area are facing job actions, including York elementary public school teachers who have vowed to continue an administrative work-to-rule campaign, and their secondary school counterparts who broke off negotiations on Saturday.

Strike by York University assistants enters second month

More than 2,000 teaching, graduate and research assistants at York University, north of Toronto, have been on strike since October 26 in what is considered a decisive battle to keep ahead of spiraling tuition costs. The outcome of the dispute could set the pattern for the profession.

The strikers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and are fighting to have wage increases reflect disproportionate increases in tuition, which as students they continue to pay. In addition, contract faculty are seeking better job security, and graduate assistants are seeking their first contract. While wages have in most cases increased with inflation over the past decade, tuition has climbed exponentially, in some cases quadrupling over the same period. Teaching assistants at the University of Toronto were on strike for three weeks last year in a failed bid to have wages tied to tuition.

While the union has estimated that as many as 200 of their members have continued teaching, the 37,000 undergraduates represented by the York Federation of Students have given their full support to the strike. Full-time faculty at York were on the picket line for eight weeks, three and a half years ago, the longest strike in Canadian university history.



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