

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 December 2000

Chilean transit workers strike

On November 26 and 27, 180 subway operators in Santiago carried out a work stoppage, but returned to work without having won any of their demands. They decided to suspend their indefinite strike after only two days when it became clear that management employees would be used to operate the trains.

The subway workers were demanding a 5 percent increase in real wages over two years. Instead, they accepted only a 3.5 percent increase over three years, half a percent less than what the agency originally offered.

In addition, the workers dropped their demand for a freeze in the percentage of part-time drivers that the agency may hire. Currently, 30 percent are part-time. This last clause was very important since the transit company is planning to hire more workers with the opening of two new lines. Management had rejected the union's right to negotiate in this area, which is reserved by law exclusively for management. The Santiago Metro transports some 800,000 passengers a day.

Public health employees strike in Chile

On November 28, 55,000 health workers went on strike in Chile for 24 hours as part of a general demand that the Lagos government improve its wage offer to all public employees.

The workers are demanding an 8.35 percent wage increase as opposed to the government, which had originally offered 3.5 percent, more than 1 percent less than next year's estimated inflation of 4.6 percent.

On the eve of the strike the government imposed a wage increase of 4.3 percent. A half-day strike of public employees took place on November 27. On the next day 21,000 health care workers and 34,000 public employees joined them from all over Chile. Workers for the Customs Department virtually sealed the borders with Argentina, Bolivia and Peru in solidarity with the public employees. Leaders of the strike reported 95 percent compliance.

On November 29, Santiago police attacked a workers rally in the vicinity of the presidential palace of La Moneda. A march of more than 1,500 public sector workers was attacked with high-pressure hoses.

Honduran nurses threaten to strike

Five thousand nurses have declared their intention to strike on December 4 against the 28 public hospitals in Honduras. They are demanding a 40 percent wage increase.

Denia Maria Avila, president of the National Auxiliary Nurses Association (ANEA), charged that the government has broken promises made six months ago to raise wages.

Currently an auxiliary nurse earns \$180 a month, which is not enough to meet everyday expenses. Last May when the auxiliary nurses struck the government replaced them with a scab force of 3,000 military nurses.

Mexico City workers march against privatization

As President Vicente Fox was being sworn in on December 1, the first mobilization of union and social organizations took place against the "neoliberal economic policies of the regime." The protesters clashed with police as they attempted to intercept Fox's motorcade.

Several youth, including members of the University of Mexico's (UNAM) Strike Committee (CGH), were injured, together with a police officer and a child. Only two arrests took place. During the melee the police used rubber bullets against the protesters. Some CGH members

voiced their suspicion that the conflict had been initiated by agents provocateurs.

The Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) organized the protest against the government's plans to privatize the public electrical industries. In his inaugural speech, Fox promised not to privatize PEMEX, the national oil company, or the electrical sector, which was actually initiated by the Zedillo administration in 1998-99.

The mobilization began with a brief rally at Mexico City's Monument to the Revolution. Most of those in attendance did not take part in the march, which was composed mainly of members of teachers' unions, students from CGH and a small contingent of self-styled anarchist students dressed in black.

Sell-out agreement at Nicaraguan maquiladora

On November 17, the Nicaraguan Federation of Garment Workers signed an agreement with the management of the Mil Colores Garment maquiladora in Managua's Las Mercedes Free Trade Zone. In return for management's promise to reinstate fired union militants, the union agreed to impose labor discipline and police the workers in collaboration with the Mil Colores bosses. The union at Mil Colores is affiliated with the CST (Sandinista Workers Federation).

The agreement provides for continuing dialog and negotiation to resolve conflicts. The union agreed to a guarantee of long-term labor peace and good labor relations "to make Mil Colores the best company in the Free Trade Zone," according to Pedro Ortega, the general secretary of the Garment Workers' Federation.

Transit strike looms in Paraguay

Paraguayan transit workers in Asuncion are set to strike on December 5. A report from the Labor Ministry indicated that it will be impossible to arrive at an agreement with the drivers before the deadline for a 24-hour work stoppage. The main cause of the strike, according to the drivers, is a decade-long management campaign of violation of labor laws and arbitrary firings.

Judicial workers mobilize in Paraguay

As of November 28, some 2,000 court workers in Paraguay were still on strike after eight days. They are demanding a bigger budget for the year 2001. The government budgeted \$80 million while the Union of Judicial Workers (STJ) is demanding a budget of \$120 million. The nation's legislature has refused to increase the allotment.

Dominican teachers strike

Teachers at the Simone Orozco Politechnic Lyceum are on strike because they have not been paid in three months. The strike began on November 29 following the Lyceum's suspension of the teachers. The strike affects 2,500 students.

The teachers have appealed to the nation's vice president and Education Secretary Milagros Ortiz Bosch so far to no avail. As a condition for going back to work, the teachers are demanding the immediate reinstatement of their fired colleagues and the restoration of back pay.

In solidarity with the Lyceum teachers, the night shift of the Lilia Portalatin Sosa School also walked out. Many of those teachers are also owed back wages. Sosa School teachers denounced the ruling Dominican Revolutionary Party for ignoring the problems of the country's western region.

Uruguayan workers in solidarity with Argentine hunger strikers

On December 1, Amnesty International and the Uruguayan labor federations called on workers to protest in front of the Argentine Embassy of Montevideo to demand the release of the La Tablada political prisoners.

The prisoners, on hunger strike for nearly three months, were condemned under draconian police-state measures for a 1989 assault of a military installation at La Tablada and have been the subject of a human rights campaign by the Organization of American States, Amnesty International and other similar organizations in Latin America and Europe. They charge the De la Rúa administration with callous indifference to these political prisoners, in marked contrast to the solicitous manner in which former torturers and kidnappers from the last military dictatorship have been treated.

Newspaper calls for beefed-up police presence against strikers

Management for the *Seattle Times* newspaper called for more police to be posted outside the printing plant where striking members of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild are picketing.

About 1,000 photographers and reporters, along with advertising, marketing and circulation workers, struck both the *Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* last week after the two sides deadlocked over wages.

The president of the *Times*, H. Mason Sizemore, made the demand for more police after strikers blocked exits from the plant that prints both daily papers. "There have been some pretty testy exchanges, and the frustration is building among people inside and outside," he said. "Our goal, one way or another, is to get the newspaper back up as close to normal as possible and as quickly as possible."

The Newspaper Guild's last proposal called for a \$3.25-an-hour wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement. Newspaper management has stuck to its demand for a \$3.30 hourly increase over six years.

Online retailer retaliates against unionization drive with layoffs

The online retailer etown announced it would lay off 22 percent of its staff November 30, just four days after a union representing some of the company's workers filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board for union representation.

In all, 28 workers will lose their jobs out of a workforce of 128. But 13 of the layoffs are targeted at the 36-member customer services department where the unionization effort has been going on.

In October two-thirds of the customer service department staged a sick-out to protest low wages. Etown responded by firing four workers. Then on November 27 the Northern California Media Workers Guild, an affiliate of the Typographical Union, filed an NLRB petition for unionization, the first instance this process has affected a dot.com entity.

Etown responded they were "compelled to accelerate our path to profitability" and denied that the layoffs were connected to the unionization effort.

Etown is not unique among the "new economy" companies to face unionization. Online bookseller Amazon.com faces a campaign by the Communications Workers of America to unionize 400 of its customer service representatives. The United Food and Commercial Workers are seeking to recruit members from Amazon's 5,000 employees in the eight distribution centers around the United States. Workers at Amazon, who are paid between \$10 and \$13 an hour, are reacting to layoffs and the fall in stock options. Amazon's German and French divisions are also facing organizing efforts.

As the mirage of lucrative payoffs from stock options sinks in and the reality of low pay, a lack of job security and long hours looms, workers are looking for alternatives. A recent study found that 5,677 workers in the dot.com industry lost their jobs in October. This figure ballooned by 55 percent to 8,789 in November. The trend will probably continue as dot.com companies fail at a rate of one per day.

Court hearings on slowdown at Northwest Airlines

Hearings on an alleged slowdown by mechanics at Northwest Airlines were scheduled to resume December 4 as the number four airline in the United States complains that it is interfering with its busy holiday traffic.

Northwest has pressed US District Court Judge David Doty to fine the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association up to \$100 million, charging that the union is behind the rash of maintenance-related requests by mechanics that are causing delays double those which transpired during the same period last year. The airline also charges that there is a concerted effort by the union behind mechanics' refusal to work overtime, further backing up its maintenance schedule. An AMFA attorney charged that codes and statistics "are being manipulated" by Northwest. The temporary restraining order was imposed on November 20.

A similar plague of cancellations has continued to hit the number one carrier, United Airlines. Some 105 flights were canceled November 30. United charged that 85 of the cancellations were due to maintenance problems. The previous day there were 134 cancellations, 92 of them maintenance related.

Rural doctors strike against Alberta government

Over 600 doctors across this western province closed their offices last Friday in the first stage of job actions by the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) against the provincial Tory government of Ralph Klein.

The doctors are seeking wage increases to bring them closer to their counterparts in other provinces. Currently Alberta doctors receive up to 32 percent less than doctors in other parts of the country, an indication of the Tory drive towards the privatization of a publicly-run system health care which has been under attack across the country. The doctors are asking for wage increases of 22 percent over two years and the province has offered only 13.4 percent in a new contract, which comes into effect at the end of March.

While doctors offices reopened Monday morning, the next phase of the campaign by the AMA, which has over 6,000 members, calls for doctors in urban areas to withdraw their services. But it is unclear what the level of participation has been to this point, and reports indicate that the action, which affected weekend and evening clinics, has had only a slight impact. The provincial government has unilaterally sought binding arbitration to bring the dispute to a quick close.

Ontario unions bluster against 60-hour week

The Ontario Tory government has introduced new legislation, Bill 147, which would increase the number of hours before overtime is paid from 44 to 60, a move that sets the legal standard back over 50 years. The bill will also provide for a new averaging formula for the calculation of overtime, which could mean that overtime would not be paid even if worked.

While the new law has elicited vocal condemnation from the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and other union organizations, proposed action has been limited to protesting the government offensive with a work-to-rule campaign in the province. "If we can't shut down the province, goddammit, we're going to slow it down," said Brian O'Keefe, secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

This is only the latest in a series of legislative offensives against workers in Ontario, to which the unions have offered only the meekest resistance. Bill 139, which is expected to get final passage this week, will sharply curb the rights of unions to organize and make it easier for employers to decertify existing unions. Bill 69, which passed last week, gives unionized contractors the right to hire nonunion workers.



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