

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 December 2000

## Confrontation over wages brewing in Mexico

On December 10, the leader of the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) warned that Mexico faces a social explosion over wages. Alberto Juarez Blancas denounced the paltry 6.5 percent offer made by private industry and called for joint labor-management negotiations with the newly elected administration of Vicente Fox.

During the election campaign, Fox promised to raise workers' living standards to the levels of the 1970s. Union officials say this would require a 25 percent minimum wage increase for the more than 40 million Mexican workers who receive wages near or below the poverty level. Blancas called for a 6 percent increase over inflation (expected to reach 9 percent next year) for most workers.

## Homeless workers protest in Rio de Janeiro

On December 7, 240 members of the Urban Workers Movement (MTU) marched in downtown Rio de Janeiro to call attention to the plight of hundreds of working class families that have no roof over their heads. The four-hour protest caused a massive traffic jam and led to a confrontation with Brazilian police. MTU leader Eric Vermelho was dragged across the pavement and arrested by the police together with four other movement leaders.

A government spokesman declared that workers choose to be homeless. Rio, like many South American cities, is ringed with a permanent population of working class families forced to live in unsanitary and overcrowded housing.

## Teamsters locals to vote on Detroit newspaper deal

The leadership of the Teamsters union has agreed to bring an offer from the Detroit Newspaper Agency to their members for a vote on December 17. Teamsters Locals 372 and 2040, representing delivery drivers and mailers, are two of the three remaining unions that have not yet ratified an agreement with the *Detroit Free*

*Press* and *Detroit News* to settle the five-year-old labor dispute. The third is a Graphic Communications International Union local.

Last month, unions representing press operators and editorial and maintenance workers at the newspapers ratified three-year contracts that expire January 15, 2004. A typographers union had already reached a new contract.

In July 1995, 2,500 newspaper workers went on strike against the media conglomerates Gannett and Knight-Ridder, which own the two newspapers. The strike was isolated by the AFL-CIO—which did nothing but organize a toothless boycott campaign—and management used scabs protected by Detroit and area police to continue production. The unions ended the walkout in February 1997. The newspapers kept strikebreakers and called back former strikers selectively, leaving hundreds of workers without jobs.

## Seattle newspaper strike talks collapse

Talks between striking newspaper workers and the *Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* broke down Monday, December 11 after five hours of negotiations with a federal mediator. No new talks were scheduled. One thousand editorial, circulation and advertising workers, members of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild at the two newspapers, struck on November 21 for improved wages and pension benefits.

## Judge denies Delta request for injunction against pilots

On December 11 a federal judge denied Delta Air Lines' request for an order requiring its pilots to resume overtime flights. The airline filed suit last week against the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) that represents its 9,800 pilots, seeking an order to make pilots restore the "status quo" in their overtime requests. It also named 49 individual pilots in the suit. While Delta concedes that all overtime flights are voluntary, the company believes a restraining order will stop pilots from organizing what Delta terms an "illegal job

action.”

Many Delta pilots have stopped requesting overtime flights, which the airline says has forced it to cancel hundreds of flights since last month. Pilots are angered with the airline's 10-year proposal that seeks to tie their raises to the company's financial performance. Delta and ALPA have been in talks on a new contract since September 1999.

Last month United Airlines obtained a temporary restraining order that bars its mechanics from an organized slowdown against the nation's largest airline. That order was lifted Thursday as United and the mechanics union resumed mediated talks. Northwest Airlines also won a temporary restraining order against its mechanics.

Meanwhile, American Airlines flight attendants rejected the carrier's latest contract offer and said they might seek a strike authorization. Airline employees are anxious to make up for severe wage and benefit cuts imposed on them in the early 1990s. The airlines, which are enjoying high profits, want to keep labor costs down.

### **Alberta doctors end 10-day strike**

Alberta doctors have ended their 10-day rotating closure of offices and clinics across the province to protest low fees and benefits. The action, which started on December 1 with 600 rural area family doctors closing clinics for a weekend, was later joined by city family doctors and several groups of specialists, including pediatricians, orthopedic surgeons and radiologists. Media reports indicated that in contrast to what had been expected, emergency wards and operation rooms were functioning at near normal pace.

The pressure tactics were advanced by the Alberta Medical Association (AMA), which represents 6,000 doctors who are embroiled in negotiations with the Alberta Conservative government. The AMA says it is demanding an increase of about \$570 million over two years to the \$970 million medical services budget. The provincial government has offered to boost the budget by \$263 million.

The doctors say the increase is needed to attract badly needed physicians to the province. A typical family doctor takes home less than \$30 an hour before taxes, because of increasing costs and professional expenses. Despite the collapse of the action by doctors, it is reported that there is widespread public support for

their struggle, which is seen as a fight back against the drive to privatize health care by the Alberta Tory government.

### **Academic workers strike continues at York University in Toronto**

Negotiators for York University in Toronto and Canadian Union of Public Employees, representing 2,100 teaching assistants, graduate assistants and contract faculty who went on strike October 26, have resumed talks after a two-week break. Academic workers are asking for a 18.75 percent increase over two years, a rise in the minimum guaranteed wage and the lowering of class sizes.



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