

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 January 2001

Costa Rican Social Security workers oppose privatization

The Union of Costa Rican Social Security Workers (UNDECA) is calling for demonstrations on January 25 to protest the privatization of health care and Social Security, as well as the increase in retirement age. UNDECA warned that the government measure would affect clinics and access to specialists in the country's hospitals and health centers. It warned that as long as the "privatization process" continues, health services would continue to deteriorate due to lack of equipment and personnel.

Guatemalan union denounces high fuel costs

The Central Workers Union of Guatemala (CGTG) denounced the monopoly that imports propane gas for consumer use. It pointed out that the Government Ministry of Energy and Mines imposes no control on the monopoly, which has continuously raised prices for propane. The fuel is a basic necessity for Guatemalan workers. The union federation is demanding the firing of the Energy and Mines minister and an end to price increases.

Guatemalan teachers demand 100 percent raise

The National Teachers Association (ANM) in Guatemala has set a January 5 deadline for the government to begin negotiations on a wage increase or face a strike. The ANM is demanding a 100 percent wage increase. Education Minister Mario Torres has agreed to talk to the teachers but has yet to offer any counter proposals. Unofficial sources expect the government to offer no more than 20 percent. The 2001 budget includes cuts in the Education and Health Services budget that would restrict raises in pay.

Nicaraguan maquiladora refuses to rehire fired union members

Negotiations continue over the rehiring of union activists fired from a Nicaraguan maquiladora last April. Pedro Ortega, leader of the National Federation of Textile, Leather and Shoe Unions (FNTPS), refused to sign the latest offer from Chentex Company, part of the Taiwan-based transnational Nien Hsieng. The offer consisted in rehiring three union leaders, transferring five and firing three. The company also promised to "review" the cases of the remaining fired workers. In a union-busting operation, the garment factory fired 121 workers last April.

Dominican Republic: unions warn of increasing poverty

The Trade Union Federation of the Northern Region (FESURNO) declared that if the draft economic liberalization measures being proposed by Dominican President Hipolito Mejia were approved, poverty would sharply increase among Dominican workers. The union predicted that thousands of workers would be forced to emigrate to other countries if the government's measures were enacted.

The Mejia government is proposing a 10 percent across-the-

board wage increase as compensation for an expected increase in prices if the economic reforms take place. FESURNO Secretary Mario Robles Fortuna demanded a 40 percent raise for all workers in the public and private sectors.

Ecuadorian workers suffer under dollarization plan

Ecuadorian trade unions are threatening to call mass protests this month against the worsening economic conditions caused by last April's replacement of Ecuador's currency—the sucre—with the dollar. President Gustavo Noboa promised price stability and economic growth from the dollarization of the economy. Instead, Ecuador continues to have record inflation—91 percent this year—the highest in Latin America.

According to Johnny Cevallos, director of the National Institute of Statistics and Census, there is no relief in sight and prices will continue to increase as a result of the draconian economic measures. Gasoline and diesel fuel prices have risen to 78 cents a liter (about US\$3 per gallon), causing a ripple effect on public transit and food prices. Transit fares went up 75 percent last month. November's consumer prices, which did not reflect the fuel increase, were 12.5 percent greater than the month before.

Argentine government threatens jobless protesters

The Argentine Interior Ministry announced on December 26 that it would no longer respond to highway blockades by unemployed workers with offers of food and jobs. Ministry officials are attempting to create a witch hunt atmosphere against radical and left organizations, which they claim met on December 16 in Buenos Aires to coordinate the protests. The Ministry declared that it is confident that it will be able to contain the protests of the most downtrodden layers of Argentine society, since "conditions do not exist for a social explosion." More than ten pickets were shot last year in clashes with government forces in protests involving highway closings.

During the weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday, protests took place in front of supermarkets and at road crossings across the country. In Neuquen Province, the police attacked the unemployed with tear-gas on December 18 and arrested 55 people, including women and children. In the Province of Corrientes, jobless workers, joined by bus drivers from the city of Corrientes, blocked the bridge that unites the provinces of Chaco and Corrientes and threatened to burn a bus. "We demand two bags of food for each family and another two bags with cleaning supplies," declared the drivers. "We also demand \$50 for each family, so that they can eat meat on New Year's eve." Route closings also took place in Buenos Aires province.

Argentine railroad unions strike

Train operators, members of the Rail Fraternity Union (FF), carried out a slowdown and strike last week in protest against

layoffs of dozens of workers by the privatized railroad companies. The strike nearly paralyzed passenger service across the nation. The union began a “fight plan” demanding the rehiring of the workers and wage increases for the coming year. The dispute now goes to arbitration. Rodolfo Daer, general secretary of what is considered the “conciliatory” Labor Federation, the Menem-Peronist faction of the CGT, is negotiating the workers' demands with the Labor Ministry.

Honduran banana workers threaten strike over layoffs

Ramon Navarro, president of the Union of Standard Fruit Company Workers (Sutrasfco), warned on December 25 that the banana workers would walk out for an indefinite period of time to protest the mass layoff at United Fruit's Buena Vista plantation, near the village of La Union. Navarro rejected the transnational company's argument that the sackings had to do with market conditions and pointed out that the company has been gradually phasing out plantations in other parts of Honduras.

Striking Seattle Times workers reject offer

Striking *Seattle Times* workers rejected the newspaper's latest offer Saturday, December 30, and voted to continue their six-week strike. Last week, in a move that undermined the solidarity of the walkout by 2,500 workers at the city's two daily newspapers, the leadership of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild agreed to a separate settlement for workers at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Workers at that newspaper, who also walked out on November 21, voted 88 to 29 to accept the deal, which included a \$3.30 raise over six years, and return to work. Workers at the *Times* rejected by a 348 to 87 margin their offer, which included management's demand to lay off 250 workers to pay for losses incurred during the strike. Union officials are continuing to promote illusions that a fair agreement can be won by relying on a federal mediator and urging consumers to boycott the paper.

American Airlines tells federal mediators not to declare impasse

American Airlines management last month urged federal mediators not to declare an impasse in the carrier's negotiations with flight attendants, a move which would allow American's 23,000 flight attendants to legally strike after a 30-day “cooling-off” period. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants is seeking a 38.5 percent wage increase spread over a six-year contract, while airline officials say they have offered 16 percent over five years plus 6 percent profit sharing. Last year, flight attendants voted down a 15.9 percent wage increase over six years with no profit sharing. Flight attendants held informational pickets in December at airports around the country to protest the lack of a contract since 1998.

Last month, the union broke off negotiations and asked the National Mediation Board to declare the talks at an impasse. Union spokeswoman Leslie Mayo said the airline's most recent offer was only marginally better than the agreement that was voted down last year and fell short on pay, retirement benefits and crew-rest rules. In 1993 American's flight attendants went on strike for five days before President Clinton ordered the union to accept binding arbitration.

Teachers union seeks peace with Ontario Tories

Amidst ongoing contract battles between school boards and

teachers across the province, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) has made a proposal to the Minister of Education, Janet Ecker, appealing for a compromise to facilitate negotiations.

While many bargaining units have signed contracts with their school boards, the teachers union has refused to participate in extra-curricular activities to protest the extra class which teachers are now required to teach. Their proposal, which has received a cool reception from the Education Minister, suggests that teachers spend an extra 20 minutes of class time in exchange for dropping the extra period.

At the same time 11,000 public school teachers are poised to enter a work-to-rule action in mid-January, which would also include the withdrawal of after-school activities, to protest the slow pace of their contract negotiations. Toronto public school teachers voted 93 percent in favor of strike action in November.

Vote forced on York University strikers

More than 2,000 contract faculty and teaching assistants at York University, north of Toronto, who have been on strike since October 26, will be forced to vote on the latest contract offer in early January. Under anti-union Ontario labor law such a vote is required if requested by an employer. The outcome is not expected to ratify the contract and is seen as a provocation by York University against Local 3903 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the union representing the strikers.

The strike is being waged over job security and spiraling tuition costs, which teaching assistants, who are also students, continue to pay. Tuition hikes have far outstripped wages over the past decade. The offer presented by management provides an increase of 2 percent per year, while the union is seeking 4 percent and has said that the offer is not worthy of consideration by their membership.

Spokespeople for both sides in the dispute have dismissed an inflammatory report from within the Ontario Tory government last week that suggests that students at York could be transferred to other schools across the province to complete their year. Classes could resume as early as January 8 if the compulsory vote is passed by the membership.



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