

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 January 2001

Student protests in Ecuador

Three days of student strikes and demonstrations rocked Ecuador last week. The protests began on Wednesday January 3 and took place in the major cities of Quito, Guayaquil and Cuenca. Clashes occurred in Quito on Friday. There are reports of five injured students and 107 arrests.

The students are demanding that the government of Gustavo Noboa rescind a package of economic austerity measures, including a 25 percent increase in the price of fuel and a 100 percent increase in the price of propane for domestic use.

The student protest was combined with a strike by transit operators in Quito and Guayaquil. The bus operators are demanding fare increases to compensate for the rise of fuel prices. On January 5 the government threatened to escalate its repression against the protesters.

An Ecuadorian court suspended the fuel price increase temporarily on January 8, over the government's objections.

Nicaraguan postal workers set to strike on January 9

Nicaraguan post office workers, members of the Manuel Valdez Union (SMV), are set to strike this Tuesday unless the Labor Ministry addresses their demands.

SMV General Secretary Francisco Guzman explained that the union is demanding that the post office adhere to a court order to pay two years' arrears in wage increases. It also is demanding parity in Christmas bonuses between union-represented and non-represented workers. The latter received a bonus of 400 cordobas, while SMV members were only paid 200. The strike has the backing of the National Labor Front, Nicaragua's central labor organization.

Seattle Times workers vote on tentative pact

Two hundred fifty striking *Seattle Times* workers were voting Monday, January 8 on a tentative contract

proposal after C. Richard Barnes, Clinton's top labor negotiator, as well as publisher Frank Blethen and Communications Workers of America national President Morton Bahr, jointly attended a membership meeting on Sunday to urge the membership to approve the pact.

One thousand workers at the *Seattle Times* and its rival, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, began their strike over better pay and benefits 49 days ago. The *Times* and *Post - Intelligencer* are owned separately but managed jointly under a federal agreement.

The leadership of the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild agreed to a separate settlement for workers at the *Post-Intelligencer*, which included a \$3.30 raise over six years. P-I workers approved their contract a week and a half ago and returned to work on January 2. *Times* workers rejected a similar offer on December 30 and voted to continue their strike.

Organizing effort met by opposition at Amazon.com

Executives at Amazon.com have begun a campaign to counter efforts by the Communications Workers of America and its affiliate WashTech to organize workers at the Seattle-based e-tailer. The company has set up a list of frequently asked questions (FAQ) about the union on an internal company web site and has held several mandatory meetings to address the organizing drive.

So far the organizers have been able to sign up between 25 and 50 percent of the more than 400 workers at Amazon's customer service center. The federal National Labor Relations Board requires the signatures of 30 percent of a designated section of a company's workforce to hold an organizing election.

Confrontation looms following York University strike vote

Students at this strike-bound school north of Toronto have been warned by the university not to attempt to return to class following a divided strike vote last week,

which has prompted threats of united action by unions.

While the vote, which was invoked against union wishes, was defeated by the largest bargaining unit, 640 contract teachers who accepted the offer could attempt to resume classes this week. The remaining strikers, 1,786 teaching assistants and graduate students, rejected the latest contract by 62 percent on Friday and weekend-long negotiations failed to resolve outstanding issues in the 10-week-old strike. While the university has said they will increase wages to keep pace with spiraling tuition costs, they have refused to provide guarantees to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents the strikers.

Following the vote, CUPE President Syd Ryan decried plans by the university to require students and faculty to cross picket lines, saying, "This was a deliberate attempt to prod confrontation." The union has vowed to bring in support from steel, auto and food workers in a show of strength against attempts to break the strike. It has insisted that the university remain closed until a contract is reached.

At the same time, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Buzz Hargrove has appealed in a letter to Ontario Labour Minister Chris Stockwell to intervene in what has become one of the longest strikes at a Canadian university. Hargrove has suggested the Tory government bring an end to the strike, saying, "The government has a big stick that they can wield here. They can use their stick to force a settlement here."

New Brunswick doctors stage province-wide walkout

One thousand three hundred doctors closed their doors indefinitely on Monday in the latest stage of their job action against the Tory government of Bernard Lord. Weekend talks with a mediator failed to yield a settlement between the government and doctors represented by the Medical Society of New Brunswick in negotiations over a new pay schedule and increased workloads.

The strike decision was taken following the latest offer by the province on December 21 and after a series of one-day strikes over the past two months. While the province is offering fee increases of 12 percent over three years, doctors are seeking a 30 percent increase to achieve parity with their counterparts in neighboring Nova Scotia. Hospitals across the province have given assurances that scheduled operations will still be

performed and that emergency rooms will continue to be staffed.

The strike by New Brunswick doctors follows similar actions across the country, which has seen strikes by doctors in British Columbia and Alberta in recent weeks against government underfunding. According to the Medical Society of New Brunswick, as many as 36,000 adults are without a family doctor in the province and many rural areas have been unable to replace departing doctors. As in other provinces, the New Brunswick government has failed to maintain adequate funding to a publicly run health care system, creating a crisis and thereby strengthening support for privatized health care.



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