

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 January 2001

Bolivian doctors strike for wage increase

Doctors in Sucre, Bolivia's southern capital, are on indefinite strike demanding a 30 percent raise from the government. Hospitals in this city are operating without doctors, with overextended nursing staffs and interns keeping most hospitals open. The doctors are expected to reject a government offer of \$140 a month as inadequate.

Sixteen-year-old badly wounded in Ecuador protests

On January 12, a high school student was badly wounded when he was hit in the face by a tear gas projectile during a protest in Quito. The youth was part of a demonstration of students and workers against government economic austerity. As promised a week before, the government of Gustavo Noboa is dealing against popular protests with a heavy hand. A government spokesperson declared that the administration's "patience was exhausted" and that order would be maintained "with all legal force" to repress protests.

On January 14, a tense calm reigned in the city of Quito following three days of demonstrations by strikers and students. Last year, on January 21, massive street marches across Ecuador forced the resignation of President Jamil Mahuad. Noboa fears that the current wave of protests will have a similar impact on the current regime.

Police attack Mexican maquiladora workers

On January 12, police in full riot gear attacked 300 strikers who were guarding the Kuk Dong textile maquiladora in Atlixco, Puebla. Rene Sanchez Juarez, the leader of a company union opposed by the workers, led the police. The group of workers included pregnant women as well as minors. There was an excessive use of force on the part of the police. At least 15 workers ended up in the hospital and were later released; two still remained hospitalized as of Friday morning.

At the time of the arrest, two leaders were violently kidnapped by the judicial police, threatened and then released. The kidnapped leaders were Claudia Ochoterena and Josefina Hernandez.

The 800 workers at the Atlixco plant have been on strike since January 9. Kuk Dong is a subcontractor for

Nike corporation and also makes sweatshirts sold at many college campuses. Workers plan to continue mobilizing, despite the company's threat to fire workers who do not return to work.

The strikers are demanding the company disregard the current scab union, reinstate all fired workers and recognize the organization that the workers are forming.

Dock workers strike in Los Angeles

Forty members of Local 13 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union shut down the Port of Los Angeles coal export terminal Wednesday, January 10, charging operators with trying to undermine union contract talks and discriminating against union members.

On Thursday the strike continued as other dock workers supported the striking longshoremen and refused to load ships at the terminal's wharf. The strike left one ship stranded and several waiting to be loaded. The Port of Los Angeles is the largest coal export terminal in the US.

The strike began after union lawyers filed charges of unfair labor practices with the National Labor Relations Board against Savage Pacific Services based in Utah. The union has charged Savage Pacific with discriminating against union supporters on job assignments and improperly meeting with individual workers to discourage them from supporting the union.

The company and the ILWU are presently involved in contract talks, the first since the union won the right to represent the workers at the terminal last January.

Seattle Times workers vote to end strike

Striking members of the *Seattle Times* voted to end their strike on Tuesday, January 9, agreeing to a contract that guaranteed jobs for all 800 strikers, the sticking point at the end of the strike that began over wages and benefits.

The settlement calls for a \$3.30-an-hour raise over six years, a proposal that was rejected by the *Seattle Times* workers on December 30, but agreed to by the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* workers on January 2 after the union agreed to separate settlements at the two newspapers.

To push the *Seattle Times* workers to an agreement, a membership meeting was called by the union that was

attended by Communication Workers of America national President Morton Bahr, Clinton's top labor negotiator Richard Barnes, as well as publisher Frank Blethen.

The *Seattle Times* workers, represented by the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild, voted 359 to 166 to accept the contract offer.

Times officials said 200 strikers will return to work by the end of next week, and claimed that everyone who participated in the strike would have their jobs back within six months. Company executives also said the strike was costly and they plan to eliminate 10 percent of the workforce, or 250 jobs, through attrition.

York University strike ended

The 11-week strike at this university north of Toronto ended last week following a ratification vote by 1,786 teaching assistants and graduate students, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), on Wednesday, January 10. Six hundred forty contract teachers in a separate bargaining unit had reached a settlement a week earlier, bringing pressure for an end to the strike.

The key issue of tuition protection was resolved with both sides reportedly making concessions. The new two-year agreement governing teaching assistants and graduate students provides a 2 percent wage increase and tuition rebates for increases above 2 percent.

While the union has declared the settlement a victory because of tuition protection, wage provisions fall well short of the 4 percent they were seeking. Both sides have blamed the other for the lengthy strike, saying the deal reached could have been passed earlier. The strike, which began on October 26, was the longest of its kind ever in Canada.

Striking New Brunswick doctors return to work

After only three days of a province-wide strike, doctors in this maritime province went back to work last Wednesday without a new contract. The New Brunswick Medical Society, representing the doctors, have asked an arbitration panel to set the terms of the contract. The two sides are far apart on the issue of wages with doctors asking for a 30 percent fee increase and the government offering only 12.5 percent over four years.

Doctors in the province have been involved in a job action against the Tory provincial government of Bernard Lord over a new fee schedule and increased workloads due to a doctor shortage. The head of the Medical Society, Dr. John McCann, explained why the strike was called off early, saying, "Given this unfortunate state of events [at the bargaining table] and the continuing anxiety in the

population over the current withdrawal of services, we have decided to end it, here and now." He also warned of a mass exodus of physicians from New Brunswick as a result of the government's unwillingness to deal with the problems of health care underfunding.

In a related development, doctors in neighboring Nova Scotia may take similar job action against the Conservative government in that province. Contract talks have only begun there, but the issue of doctor shortages is expected to present a significant obstacle to an easy settlement in this province as well.

Possible mediation in Falconbridge strike

Without consulting the union representing workers in this five-month-old strike, Falconbridge Ltd. and the provincial government have proposed that a mediator be appointed to end the dispute. Talks between the giant copper and nickel producer in Sudbury and 1,260 workers represented by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have not resumed since being called off last November.

Falconbridge reported last week that Ontario Labour Minister Chris Stockwell had suggested mediation to end the strike. CAW head Buzz Hargrove, however, has said that while both sides had previously agreed in principle to mediation, the union was not consulted over the latest proposal. The CAW recently filed a complaint with the Ontario Labour Board accusing the company of bargaining in bad faith and has suggested that their stalling tactics in negotiations are part of a drive to get rid of the union. Falconbridge has reportedly continued to operate at 60 percent of capacity since the strike began August 1, using management and workers from other facilities.



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