

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 January 2001

Labor crisis shakes Colombia

Colombian workers are mobilizing against rising unemployment and the Pastrana administration's economic retrenchment. They are demanding minimum wage increases of 8.8 percent, the rate of inflation. Bavaria beer workers, who have been on strike for six weeks, and Colombian Red Cross employees are demanding 25 percent raises.

The Workers Trade Union (USO), a powerful oil workers union, is threatening to paralyze oil refineries if the national oil company Ecopetrol turns down a 14 percent wage demand. USO President Hernando Hernandez declared on January 25, "We are considering the possibility of national strikes if Ecopetrol does not show more flexibility." Ecopetrol has offered a 7.2 percent wage increase, an offer made by the legislature for all state industrial enterprises.

In the case of Ecopetrol and all public employees, the government's position is that layoffs would result if it were to give more. The official unemployment rate in Colombia currently stands at 19 percent, the highest in Latin America.

Colombian banana workers mourn leader

On January 25, 1,500 banana workers in Cienaga, Department of Magdalena, Colombia, abandoned their posts to mourn the death of Jose Luis Guette Montero. Guette, president of the National Union of Industry and Agriculture (SINTRAINAGRO), was the twentieth labor leader assassinated in Magdalena since 1991.

Guette, 35 years old and father of seven, was shot four times on his way home on January 24. He had been carrying out negotiations with banana producers in the region.

However, SINTRAINAGRO leaders say the negotiations had nothing to do with his death. They point out that Guette had received numerous death threats from unknown persons presumed to be right-wing death squads linked to the Colombian armed forces. Guette's death follows the same pattern in the killings of 19 previous union leaders in Magdalena. No one has ever been brought to trial for those killings.

Costa Rican educators and health workers protest

On January 25 hundreds of teachers and health workers marched through downtown San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, receiving warm applause from crowds lining the route of their demonstration. The workers are protesting the

privatization of Costa Rica's Social Security Agency (CCSS).

Representatives from other Costa Rican cities, such as Limon, Guanacaste, Puntarenas, and Turrilba, also participated. This is to be the first of a series of mobilizations against the government's policies, with the next scheduled for February 16.

1,500 jobs threatened in Guatemala City

Some 1,500 workers may lose their jobs in Guatemala City for protesting against privatization proposals of current Mayor Fritz Garcia Gallont. They are employees of the Public Services and Park agencies.

Officials told the workers that an administrative reorganization was the reason for their February 1 layoff. The workers, convinced that they are being terminated because of their opposition to privatization, have asked to meet with the mayor, who has refused their requests.

Mexican union proposes "jobs crusade"

The Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM) of the border State of Coahuila is organizing a campaign to defend jobs in response to the impact of the US economic slump on their border economy.

CTM Local President Tereso Median Ramirez gave a press conference on January 24 announcing the "jobs crusade," declaring that the union's objective was to defend jobs, insure labor peace and increase quality and competitiveness.

Medina indicated that the US slowdown is already being felt by the workers at DaimlerChrysler and General Motors assembly plants who are being laid off. The GM plant in Ramos Arizpe, with 6,000 employees, has already scheduled 21 layoff days before the end of March. Sacked workers will only receive 55 percent of their normal wages.

Nicaraguan workers demand 100 percent raise in minimum wage

Negotiations will reopen on February 6 in Nicaragua over the minimum wage. The Sandinista Labor Federation (CST) is demanding a minimum wage that reflects the cost of the basic family bread basket, or 24,000 cordobas a month, which would double the present minimum wage.

Management is offering a 10 percent raise. The minimum wage has not been raised in 15 months. Last November's negotiations broke down over the same issue.

Judge orders striking Union Pacific locomotive engineers back to work

A federal judge ordered 8,000 striking locomotive engineers at Union Pacific Railroad back to work on Saturday morning, ending a job action that had disrupted rail traffic in 23 states. The engineers, members of the Brotherhood of Local Engineers, had initiated the strike at 12:01 a.m. Saturday, setting up picket lines in Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver, San Antonio and North Platte, Nebraska.

The engineers are protesting new qualification standards for personal leave days. Railroad engineers generally work 10-12 hour days without scheduled days off. They must request time off, and the workers' union said Union Pacific is denying these requests, in violation of their contract.

Union Pacific went to court arguing for a restraining order, claiming that "personal leave time is a minor dispute" and therefore not subject to strike action under the Railroad Labor Act. The strike affected more than 38,000 miles of rail lines, mostly used for freight.

Writers Guild, studios begin two-week bargaining session

The Writers Guild of America (WGA) and studio representatives began a two-week bargaining session on a new contract on January 22. The present agreement expires May 2. Writers are asking for more money for television programs that run in foreign markets, on cable TV and on the Fox network. They also want more compensation when programs run on the Internet and for sales of movies on videocassette and DVD. Writers are also asking for more input to the filmmaking process.

Although both sides have agreed not to discuss details of the negotiations, they are reportedly far apart. The studios have taken a hard line, citing an erosion in network audiences, declines in TV syndication, a fragmented cable market and slow foreign sales. WGA President John Wells commented, "We want to make a deal, but to ask our members to ratify a contract that does not address these important issues will doom it to failure again."

Doctors continue fight against New Brunswick Tories

The dispute between the government and doctors in New Brunswick, which provoked a three-day strike by 1,300 doctors earlier this month, will be decided by an arbitration board in the coming months after final talks failed last week. Whatever the outcome of that decision, the Tory government of Bernard Lord is facing continuing battles over the deterioration of a publicly run health care system and a severe doctor shortage in the province.

The provincial Tories have been rocked by overwhelming public support for the doctors, who are seeking a 30 percent raise in fees. They are also fighting restrictions which have

led to a situation where as many as 30,000 adults are without a family doctor. The province is offering a 17 percent increase over four years, but doctors in New Brunswick have not received a significant raise in over a decade. The New Brunswick Medical Society, representing doctors, have not ruled out the possibility of further job action.

At the same time, a group of doctors has launched a court challenge against New Brunswick's quota system for physicians, charging violations of their constitutional rights and the erosion of publicly run health care in the province. The system, which determines where doctors can practice, has been cited as one reason the province is having a hard time attracting new doctors and retaining existing ones.

Police confrontation in Falconbridge strike

The six-month-old strike at the nickel giant Falconbridge near Sudbury in northern Ontario erupted in violence at a rally last Saturday. Riot police battled with about 150 rallying strikers who had marched to a picket site at a plant entrance. A dispute erupted there with guards from Accufax, the security company hired by Falconbridge when the strike began last August. There were reports of injuries and arrests, and a number were treated for minor injuries. Workers have been charged with damaging company property.

The strike involves 1,260 workers. The dispute has become increasingly bitter since recent negotiations collapsed after only three days and the provincial Tory government threatened to appoint a mediator to end the impasse. The "One Day Longer" rally was organized by the Canadian Auto Workers, the union representing the strikers, as a gesture of defiance against company efforts to break the union at one of the oldest locals in North America.



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