

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 March 2001

Teachers strike in Honduras

Fifty-five thousand elementary school teachers in Honduras carried out a 24-hour strike February 28 that canceled classes for over 2.2 million public school students. The strikers demanded that the government hire 4,500 new teachers this year to begin addressing the national teacher shortage at the country's 10,000 public schools.

Arnaldo Pinto, general secretary of the Federation of Teachers Organizations (FOMH), denounced government inaction and said, "Strikes will continue if the government does not attend to our demands." Honduran elementary teachers earn an average of \$100 a month and high school teachers are paid \$200. During the last two years Honduran teachers have carried out at least 20 strikes over pay.

Honduran national registry clerks to strike

National registry clerks in Honduras are poised to strike this week to demand a 50 percent raise. The government workers union said they will walk out unless an agreement is reached by March 5. The clerks union, however, lifted an earlier strike deadline on March 1, claiming a contract seemed imminent. The government appears to have reneged on its tentative agreement.

Venezuelan oil workers threaten to strike

The largest Venezuelan oil union (FEDEPETROL) broke off negotiations with the state-owned Venezuelan Petroleum Company (PDVSA) on March 1 and has threatened to call a strike of the company's 40,000 workers in the next few days. PDVSA has refused to grant the union's request for a 15 percent pay increase.

FEDEPETROL leader Carlos Ortega declared that it was pointless to continue negotiations given "the confrontational attitude" that PDVSA President General Guaicaipuro Lameda expressed toward the firm's workers and unions.

The conflict seemed on the road to resolution when a congressional committee and PDVSA management agreed to negotiate with the union. It now appears that this was only a ploy to delay the start of the strike.

Venezuelan oil workers average 340,000 bolivares a month (484 US dollars). Four months ago, a four-day oil workers strike created a crisis for Venezuela's oil industry, the country's principal industry. At that time workers obtained a \$9 increase.

Northwest Airlines mechanics authorize strike

Northwest Airlines mechanics, cleaners and custodians voted overwhelmingly Friday and Saturday to authorize a strike against the nation's fourth largest airline, union officials reported. According to a union press release, members of the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association voted 96 percent in favor of authorizing a strike. The union has been negotiating for a new contract since October 1996.

Representatives of Northwest and the union return to Washington to meet with the National Mediation Board on March 7, giving the sides five days for talks before a 30-day cooling-off period ends at 12:01 a.m. EST March 12. The union then would be allowed to strike. President Bush has said if the dispute is not settled by then he will further delay any job action for 60 days by appointing a presidential emergency board to examine the issues and propose a solution.

AMFA negotiators said Bush's pledge to block a strike takes away all incentive for the company to negotiate a settlement. Bush's labor secretary, Elaine Chao, formerly served on Northwest's board of directors. Current Northwest board member Frederick Malek was campaign manager for Bush's father in his 1988 and 1992 White House races.

Judge issues court order against American Airline mechanics

On March 1 a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order against the Transport Workers Union, which represents 31,000 mechanics, fleet service clerks and other workers at AMR Corp.'s American Airlines, and ordered the union to stop job actions by its members at New York's JFK International Airport.

Last week a slowdown by workers at the world's second largest airline led to the cancellation of 129 flights out of Kennedy. The airline and the union have been in contract talks since last October. The current contract expired Thursday, March 1.

American is joining a growing number of major airlines, including Northwest, United and Delta, that have called on the courts to intervene against their workforces, while repeatedly stalling in contract negotiations. The American mechanics' job action occurred only days after the US Supreme Court upheld a \$45.5 million fine against the

Allied Pilots Association and two of its officers for refusing to halt a sick-out in February 1999.

United flight attendants threaten to strike

The flight attendants union at No. 1 carrier United Airlines has threatened to strike if the airline goes ahead with the purchase of US Airways without obtaining a waiver from the Association of Flight Attendants. Talks between the union and the airline broke down March 1 over whether to link a pay increase to consent from flight attendants for the purchase of US Airways. The flight attendants' union wanted to prevent the airline from "unilaterally changing" its contract. The union said there will be a formal strike vote on March 8, and it urged members not to take any job actions at this time.

Los Angeles health care workers protest

More than 1,000 health care workers and disabled patients filled the streets near the governor's downtown Los Angeles office March 2 to demand better wages for caregivers and increased state funding for the disabled. The protesters, which included many in wheelchairs or using crutches and walkers, were angered that the January budget proposed by the legislature did not provide enough funding for the Department of Disability Services.

Detroit supermarket workers vote to strike

Thousands of Kroger and Farmer Jack supermarket employees voted to strike Sunday, March 4, just hours before their three-year contracts expired at midnight. Nearly 95 percent of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 876 members who voted cast ballots authorizing the strike, but union officials did not call a walkout Monday. A strike could affect about 14,000 employees at roughly 190 Farmer Jack and Kroger stores, most in southeastern Michigan.

A spokeswoman for the UFCW International Union said the union met with Kroger management all day Sunday and that negotiations stalled over health benefits. Other issues on the table are pension contributions and the two-tier wage system. The union wants the company to increase its contribution to the pension fund and to end the two-tier wage system that pays less to newer employees.

New Brunswick hospital strike in jeopardy

Over 2,000 health care workers who went on strike March 2 may be returning to work following a weekend deal reached between their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and government negotiators. The proposed settlement, which has yet to be ratified, provides for wages well below what workers were seeking and was accepted by the union under threat of back-to-work legislation.

The strikers, which include maintenance and clerical staff as well as nursing and lab assistants at the province's hospitals, have been seeking wage improvements of up to 18

percent over three years. Tory Premier Bernard Lord announced Sunday that the government deal provides a 12.5 percent raise over four years.

While most of the province's 6,000 health care workers are in essential service jobs and prohibited from striking, those on strike are among 2,500 who could have walked out. Lord had called an emergency sitting of the legislature on Friday to ram through a back-to-work order, which could still mean hefty penalties for the union and striking workers. About 200 demonstrators protested outside the legislature on the weekend to oppose the government's action.

This strike is part of a protracted struggle to defend publicly funded health care, which prompted a three-day walkout by doctors in January. Despite strong public support for the fight against health care cuts in New Brunswick, the haste of the union to reach a sell-out deal reveals their unwillingness to lead such a struggle against the Tory government. Results of the ratification vote are expected to be known by Wednesday.

Canadian inmates used in cheap labor call center

A telemarketing call center using about 20 inmates from federal penitentiaries has begun operation, the first of its kind in Canada, at the Pittsburgh Institution outside Kingston, Ontario. The prisoners are paid between \$1.25 and \$1.75 an hour, which amounts to less than a quarter of the legal minimum wage.

Officials defend the practice with the claim that it provides training to inmates which will help them get jobs when they are released. Call center work is notoriously high pressure and low paying, requiring little skill. Ron Hiebert, president of the Telecommunications Workers Union, has condemned the practice, saying, "What will restrict them from doing other things when this gets going? Where does it end?"

Prisoners typically work a seven-hour day and may be required to do overtime. According to a spokesman for CORCAN, the government agency set up to develop such projects, "They've got a very big stake at making this work, so the quality tends to be very high and the motivation is very, very high." While this practice has been in place for some time in the US, this is test case for Canadian prisoners being used as telemarketers.



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