

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 April 2001

Bolivian workers and peasants mobilized

Over the weekend of April 7 and 8, Bolivian armed forces announced plans to contain a march of the United National Coordination (COMUNAL) set to begin on April 9. COMUNAL consists of Bolivian unions, peasant organizations, Indian organizations, and middle class groups from the Cochabamba region. COMUNAL supporters are marching from Cochabamba to La Paz, one of Bolivia's capitals, to demand that the government of Hugo Banzer address Bolivia's social crisis.

Some of COMUNAL's demands are for land reform, water rights, universal social security rights and the repudiation of the nation's foreign debts. They are expected to reach La Paz on April 23. COMUNAL leaders insist that the protest will take place even in the face of army repression.

On March 7, many of the same groups that compose COMUNAL gave the government a 30-day ultimatum for it to respond to its petitions and to carry out previous agreements. The month expired on April 7 with no response for Banzer. Were a state of siege to be declared, the protesters threaten to block roads throughout Bolivia. Victor Gemmio, commander of the army's Third Division, indicated that their plan is to repress the marchers and "protect the government."

Bus drivers strike paralyzes Sao Paulo

About 1.2 million passengers were left with no bus service on April 6 by a transit strike in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The bus drivers union organized the job action to demand back pay owed to the drivers. For their part, the private transportation companies say that they are owed government subsidies. Edivaldo Santiago da Silva, president of the bus operators union, said that the dispute had not been settled, warning Sao Paulo residents that strikes may continue next week.

In Nicaragua, adults are displacing "semaphore children"

As unemployment mounts in Nicaragua, adults are replacing children in the so-called semaphore industries, in which petty services and small items are sold for cars stopped at red lights. A recent report from the Department of Childhood and Adolescence (PNA) indicates that 53 percent of the population engaged in such "informal" urban jobs consist of young boys and girls.

Of late, however, adults are displacing children as unemployment skyrockets in Managua and other Nicaraguan cities. The PNA fears that many of these children then wind up exploited by the sex industry. PNA Chairman Carlos Emilio Lopez declared that although the Department lacks adequate statistics, recent evidence indicates that the sex industry is growing and absorbing many of Nicaragua's street children, both in urban and rural districts.

Lopez also said that even those children that simply sell water and tortillas at stoplights, are frequent victims of abuse by older children and adults. The PNA reports that out of the 303,000 children that work at semaphores, only 71,000 report going to school. Those who do attend school require on average 10.3 years to complete their elementary education.

Transport workers strike in Ecuador

Public transport workers in Ecuador struck during the last week of March to protest government proposals that would result in the lowering of wages. The strike disrupted businesses and schools in several cities,

with the exception of the country's capital, Quito, where the local union did not support the strike.

The government ties wage increases for transport workers to fare increases imposed on riders. When the government implemented a 75 percent increase in fares last January—along with hikes in cooking fuel and gasoline—workers, students and indigenous organizations launched several weeks of protests, which ended only after the government unleashed a violent counterattack that left four dead and nearly one hundred wounded.

The fare increases remained in place until new discussions between indigenous organizations and the government resulted in new proposals for fare reductions, provoking transport workers to strike. Government-imposed increases in domestic fuel prices have been dictated by IMF policies in exchange for loans.

Hawaii teacher strike shuts school system statewide

Public school teachers and state university instructors walked off their jobs April 4 in a statewide shutdown of the Hawaii education system. It is reportedly the first time in US history that a statewide teachers strike has shut down all public schools from kindergarten through the university level.

The Hawaii State Teachers Association called a strike after the breakdown of negotiations. The union represents nearly 13,000 public school teachers. A short time later the University of Hawaii Professional Assembly called its 3,100 members on strike. Hawaii, unlike other US states, has a statewide public education system.

The walkout has affected 180,000 public school students and shut down the 10 campuses of the University of Hawaii, as well as community colleges. U of H officials told students to report to classes, but said they could leave if no instructor appeared after 10 minutes. The strike appears to be solid, with 98 percent of teachers honoring picket lines.

The main issue in the walkout is wages. Hawaii has the highest cost of living in the United States, but teachers in Hawaii rank eighteenth in pay. Factoring in the cost of living, the teachers union says its members' salaries are the lowest in the country. The union is demanding a 22 percent increase over four years. The state offered 14 percent over two years.

The faculty union says the major dispute involves the state's exclusion of 300 university lecturers, who do not enjoy the same status as professors, from its pay raise offer. State officials angered faculty during negotiations by threatening to pay them for just nine months of the year, suspending health and retirement payments during the summer.

Mechanics union reaches tentative agreement with Northwest Airlines

Negotiators for the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association, which represents more than 9,600 Northwest Airlines mechanics, cleaners and custodians, announced Monday that they had reached a tentative agreement with the US's fourth largest airline carrier. The settlement, which must be ratified by union members, is aimed at averting a potential strike that could have begun on May 11. Workers were poised to strike earlier in the year but President Bush intervened, saying he would not permit any strikes at major airlines.

AMFA officials said they reached agreement on a comprehensive pay and benefits package, resolving the four-year-old dispute, but did not

release any details of the deal. The agreement came as a Presidential Emergency Board appointed by Bush was due to issue its recommendations for a contract, which the airline had already promised to accept. Although the AMFA was not bound to accept the proposals and left open the possibility of calling a strike, under the terms of the Railway Labor Act the Republican-led Congress would have had the power to block a walkout and impose a resolution.

TWA reaches agreement with mechanics to waive parts of contract

The International Association of Machinists and Trans World Airlines reached an agreement to waive parts of the union contract in order to facilitate the planned acquisition of the bankrupt air carrier by American Airlines.

The deal came just days before the sale of TWA to American was expected to close. Earlier the Air Line Pilots Association accepted contract waivers similar to those agreed to by the IAM. Union officials justified the pacts on the ground that the alternative was the elimination of the entire union contract. TWA had threatened to ask the federal bankruptcy court overseeing the sale of TWA to cancel its labor agreement with the IAM.

The unions at American airlines are opposing the acquisition of TWA on the grounds that the integration of the two workforces will adversely impact its membership. Unions at the two airlines have refused to form a common front over the issue of the merger, permitting management to pit workers against each other based on narrow craft interests.

United Airlines flight attendants threaten walkout

Flight attendants at United Airlines are threatening a job action by its 26,000 members if management proceeds with plans to buy US Airways. The Association of Flight Attendants said that its members voted 97 percent to authorize a strike.

The job actions, called CHAOS (Create Havoc Around Our System), could begin as early as mid-May and would not be prohibited by the Railway Labor Act, the union claimed. United management called the threatened job action illegal and issued a statement saying that any workers who failed to show up for work would be fired or disciplined.

The flight attendants union says the proposed purchase of US Airways would violate their contract. "We are not in traditional contract negotiations, so traditional rules do not apply and they will be unilaterally changing the contract when they purchase US Airways," a flight attendants spokesperson said.

Delta pilots union near a deal

The chairman of Delta Air Lines' pilots union said his organization was within days of reaching a deal to end nearly two years of contract negotiations. April 29 is the end of a 30-day cooling-off period, imposed by the National Mediation Board after the pilots rejected binding federal arbitration. After this period the company's 9,700 pilots could legally strike, but President Bush has threatened to block a walkout. Contested issues include salary, retirement compensation and increasing pay for Delta Express pilots.

Meanwhile, a strike by 1,350 pilots at Delta's regional airline, Comair, entered its third week Monday. Many Delta pilots have joined the picket lines of their coworkers at Comair, but the Air Line Pilots Association has taken no action to block Delta from flying Comair's routes during the strike.

Toronto strike closes schools

The strike by 13,000 support workers against the Toronto District School Board, which began on April 1, has caused the closure of a number of schools across the city despite the insistence by the board that schools remain open.

School staff, including janitors, bus drivers, secretaries, as well as language and music teachers, went on strike against plans to contract out some services and for wage improvements. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents the strikers, is seeking an increase

of 8 percent over two years while the board is offering from 4 to 6 percent over the same period. School boards across the province have been embroiled in contract disputes with school staff since the provincial Tory government introduced a new funding formula two years ago, which drastically reduced education budgets.

While the unions representing teachers have not asked their membership to honor picket lines, many teachers have refused to cross. Thousands of students have stayed away from classes since the strike began. Mass pickets were held last week outside at least 18 of the 565 schools affected. Media reports have focused on allegations of vandalism by students and calls to the Ontario provincial government to legislate the teachers back to work. The administration of Ontario Premier Mike Harris has so far indicated that it has no such plans and is taking a wait and see attitude. Neither side has expressed optimism for a quick settlement and talks are being held under a media blackout. The school board has said that schools will remain open until at least Easter weekend.

Newfoundland public sector strike settled

The largest strike in the history of this province ended last Friday when a deal was reached between government negotiators and the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE), which represents 19,000 public service workers.

Over the course of the one-week strike, during which yet another snowstorm hit the province, Premier Roger Grimes had threatened to declare a state of emergency to compel striking snow plow drivers back on the job or alternatively to bring in private contractors to clear the roads. The union responded by allowing at least 17 striking drivers to assist in snow clearing and the union leadership has suggested that the storm was a factor in the early settlement of the strike.

While a vote on the deal will not be held for at least another week, workers were asked to begin returning to work last Friday. Although no details of the settlement have been released, the union expressed satisfaction with the deal. The union had been seeking a 15 percent wage hike and the province was offering 13 percent at last report.

Labor strife grows in British Columbia

With the continuation of the strike by transit workers in the southern region of the province, other sectors are poised to join a series of strikes this week. While rotating strikes by health care workers were halted last week with a tentative settlement, nurses in the province have given their union an overwhelming strike mandate, which could result in some form of job action in the coming days.

A Labour Relations Board ruling last week that limited picketing by security staff at the rapid transit system to allow trains to operate without interference has been countered by unionized train operators, who are refusing to cross picket lines. Strikes by a number of transit unions began last week and have affected bus and rail lines.

The walkouts have prompted the opposition Liberals to call on the provincial New Democratic Party government to legislate strikers back to work. With the anticipated collapse of the social democratic NDP in the upcoming election, the Liberals are looking for a cooling-off period to defuse the growing labor unrest in the province. An election is expected to be called some time this month, meaning no new legislation could be introduced to force an end to the strikes.



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