Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 April 2001

Bolivian unions, peasants mobilize against Banzer

On April 12, over 600 Bolivian soldiers attacked a protest march of peasants and workers heading toward La Paz in the city of Pongo, 97 kilometers from the Cochabamba-Oruro Highway. Included among the security forces were masked informers who singled out protesters for arrest. Police said 105 people were arrested, but it is not clear how many have been released or where the remainder are being held.

Following the latest attack the Bolivian Labor Central (COB) ended negotiations with the government of Hugo Banzer over the National Health Board and called for mass mobilizations of workers on April 17. The social organizations organizing the march declared that they will set up highway barricades across the nation. The Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Rural Workers announced a national 90-day campaign of roadblocks to demand the end of economic policies that “impoverish us to the level of misery.”

Brazilian dock strike ends in defeat

Striking stevedores in Santos, Brazil went back to work April 10, as their union attempted to obtain an agreement with the government for “voluntary” retirements. The strike began on March 27 when the union hiring hall was displaced by a private labor agency and workers walked out in defiance of the cargo companies and the Labor Tribunal.

Under the threat of massive fines, the union was able to force through a back-to-work vote while the issue is resolved in Brasilia, Brazil's capital city. Technically, the private labor agency is supposed to rotate workers equitably into jobs. In practice, it will be able to assign jobs as it sees fit. This will facilitate a reduction in employment with the consequent speedup of the remaining workers.

According to Santos Stevedores Union President Vanderlei José da Silva, the union has already adopted the most “modern methodology, imported from Europe and the United States,” to squeeze productivity out of longshore workers. Silva claims that the strike movement lost steam after a week. In addition to $100,000 daily fines against the union, the port installed equipment to replace workers, allowing it to begin partial operations with no stevedores. Furthermore the docks were surrounded by government troops to intimidate striking workers.

Negotiations in Hawaii teachers strike

Representatives of the Hawaii State Teachers Association and state officials continued talks on a contract settlement over the weekend under the auspices of a federal mediator. A walkout April 5 by 12,000 public school teachers and 3,000 college instructors has shut down the Hawaii education system. US District Judge David Ezra warned teachers that he is “watching” the strike, alleging concern over its impact on special education services. He has indicated that he may intervene to force an end to the walkout if it continues much longer.

The strike is solid with 99 percent of teachers and 90 percent of university instructors honoring picket lines. The strike has shut down all but one of the state's 252 public schools and closed all 10 campuses of the University of Hawaii. Democratic Governor Benjamin Cayetano has said that the state cannot afford teachers' demands for pay increases. Hawaii teachers currently rank eighteenth in the US in pay, but the state has the highest cost of living in the country.

Mechanics union signs tentative deal with Northwest Airlines

Members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) are voting over the next three to four weeks on a tentative agreement reached by the union covering 9,500 workers at Northwest Airlines. The four-year agreement would give mechanics an average pay raise of about 24 percent, and cleaners and custodians a 13 percent raise. Approval would end the four-and-a-half-year dispute, which included constant stalling by management and the decision by workers to quit the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and affiliate with the AMFA, after overwhelmingly rejecting a contract offer negotiated by the IAM.

If mechanics reject the pact they will not be able to legally strike until June 13, a month later than originally planned. A presidential emergency board recommendation to end the dispute was set to go to President Bush last week, but federal mediators requested an extension to May 14 because the tentative agreement was reached. The union is blocked from striking for 30 days after the board issues its report.

The mechanics were three days away from striking last month when Bush intervened at federal mediators' request, requiring another 60 days of negotiations overseen by the emergency board. It was an unusual step because a president has created only one other emergency board in the past 33 years. The board's recommendations are nonbinding, but Congress can intervene to impose the settlement.

Delta Air Lines says pilot strike likely

Delta Air Lines has said that a strike by its pilots is virtually inevitable unless President Bush intervenes. The airline has repeatedly reminded President Bush of the statement he made last March pledging to prevent any airline strikes this year. Pilots at Delta's low cost subsidiary Comair have been on strike since March 26. The pilots are calling for wage increases to bring their pay more in line with pilots at Delta.

Pilots at Delta will be legally free to strike beginning April 29. Delta said that its latest offer is $1.7 billion short of what is being

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demanded by the Air Line Pilots Association. The union accused Delta of “exaggerating” the differences between the two contract proposals.

Actors' unions to begin negotiations

The Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television & Radio Artists have set May 10 for the start of contract negotiations with Hollywood producers and studios. The contracts for the two unions, which represent 135,000 performers, expire June 30. A spokesman for the producers said that contract negotiations with actors could be delayed if no settlement is reached with the Screen Writers Guild. Contract talks between screenwriters and management are set to resume April 17. The contract for 17,000 screenwriters expires May 1. The Screen Writers Guild is asking for more money when programs are rebroadcast and are distributed on video, DVD and the Internet.

New York City public employees union accepts merit pay

Leaders of District Council 37 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), New York City's largest public workers union, agreed to a tentative 27-month contract that accedes to many of the demands for merit pay made by Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The contract also provides an 8 percent raise. Giuliani hailed the accord as “historic” for acknowledging the “city's right to implement a performance compensation plan.”

The agreement, which covers 125,000 DC 37 members, is the first to be reached since contracts affecting most of the city's 300,000 unionized workers expired last year. Teachers union President Randi Weingarten, who was part of the Municipal Labor Committee that negotiated the concessions contract, said the city's 80,000 public school teachers needed more than an 8 percent raise to catch up with salaries in the suburbs, but she did not distance herself from the merit pay agreement.

Public employees will now vote on the settlement. During voting on the last contract, several union leaders stuffed ballot boxes to ensure ratification of an unpopular five-year deal that included a two-year wage freeze. Several of DC 37's top leaders pleaded guilty to fraud or were later convicted of fraud.

Resident assistants organize at University of Massachusetts

Students who monitor dormitories at the University of Massachusetts have notified the college administration that they intend to organize a union. If approved by the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission, the bargaining unit would constitute the first undergraduate resident assistant union in the US.

Resident assistants earn less than $2.50 an hour, after the cost of their rooms is subtracted from their pay. They say they are also subject to arbitrary discipline and firings. Not long after the movement to unionize started last spring, the university fired two resident assistants, an action that angered many students.

Two-thirds of resident assistants at the university have signed union authorization cards. The proposed bargaining unit is to be affiliated with the United Auto Workers. University of Massachusetts Chancellor David Scott has said his administration is opposed to resident assistants unionizing.

Halifax airport workers strike

One hundred sixty airport support staff in Halifax, Nova Scotia, members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), struck April 12 following the breakdown of negotiations. Reports indicate little flight disruption so far at Halifax International airport, Atlantic Canada's busiest. Striking support staff, including firefighters, electricians, maintenance and office workers, have been without a contract since February 2000. The main issues in the dispute are job security, wages and the length of a new contract.

Mediation resumes in Toronto school strike

Mediated talks between the Toronto District School Board and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) resumed April 12 and continued through Easter weekend under a media blackout. An earlier round of negotiations collapsed April 9.

The strike by 13,000 janitors, bus drivers, secretaries and some teachers is entering its third week and has grown increasingly bitter. CUPE Local 4400 held daily mass pickets at dozens of schools last week. While the board has refused to officially close any of the 565 schools affected by the strike, a number were shut down as a result of the mass pickets, and many teachers and students have refused to attend classes.

Mediator Mort Mitchnick resumed negotiations with the two sides after the union relaxed its position on the key issue of contracting out under the threat of a possible back-to-work order by the Tory-controlled Ontario provincial government

Union ends Calgary transit strike

The seven-week-old strike by 2,000 bus and train drivers in Calgary ended last week with major concessions on the part of the union. On April 11, workers voted 91 percent in favor of a contract very similar to one they had previously rejected, bringing an end to the longest transit strike in Calgary's history.

The deal will give workers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), wage increases of 10 percent over three years and an increased signing bonus of $850. However, on the key issue of the use of lower wage drivers on the new shuttle buses, the union made deep concessions. The union had been demanding that the shuttle bus drivers be paid the same as regular drivers. The new agreement merely stipulates that the city limit shuttle usage to 20 percent of service.

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