

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 April 2001

Rural workers protest in Brazil

On April 17 the movement of landless rural workers (MST) held rallies in Sao Paulo and 22 other cities to commemorate the massacre of 18 of their own in Eldorado dos Carajas five years ago.

MST sources reported that the Sao Paulo protest of 500 people included members of the MST and of local unions.

In Sao Paulo, many MST women remained over the weekend to lobby politicians. The men marched on to other parts of the state where land occupations are taking place.

Bolivian protests continue

A march of peasants, rural workers, public employees, health workers and teachers—from Cochabamba to La Paz, Bolivia—continues under intense government harassment. The support for the march has aggravated the crisis facing the regime of Hugo Banzer.

In La Paz, on April 20 there was a massive protest of factory workers organized by the Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB). The protest was both a sign of support for the Cochabamba marchers and to petition the government to respond to economic demands from the industries represented. The COB reported that workers from 70 factories took part in the demonstration.

Health services paralyzed in Colombian city

On April 20, 400 health workers from various health services walked out in the city of Sincelejo in North Central Colombia, an oil producing region near the Caribbean Sea. The workers are demanding 1,200 million pesos (about US\$1 million) in back wages.

Carmen Covo, representative of the National Health and Social Security Workers Union (SINDESS), explained that the walkout resulted from the refusal of the municipal government to pay the workers as agreed in January.

Covo indicated that workers have not been paid at all this year. Some workers are owed up to seven months back pay. She indicated that the strike would only end when the city paid its debt in full.

Mexican protests against the Value Added Tax

On April 15 and 16 Mexico City was paralyzed by unions and citizens groups protesting against the imposition of the Value Added Tax (VAT) on food and medicine. Streets were barricaded and rallies took place in opposition to the new

tax.

University students from UNAM have joined in the protests as have several Mexican unions. Up until now food and medicine had been exempt from taxation. A government official justified the new measure, declaring that in order to increase benefits for the poor the Fox administration needed to tax them more heavily, effectively making them pay for their own “relief.”

On April 24, several of Mexico's truck drivers unions plan a 24-hour strike against the VAT. Last week the truck drivers leaders denounced the new measure as a “betrayal” of the interests of Mexicans and an “aggression” against the working class.

Since the 1970s the purchasing power of workers in Mexico has been steadily declining. It is now 20 percent lower than in 1974. Many families are barely able to make ends meet.

Washington state workers conduct rolling strikes

Members of the Washington State Federation of State Employees struck selected state agencies last week to pressure the legislature for higher salaries and a cap on employee-paid health costs. It was the first ever strike by the 19,000-member union.

Washington's Democratic governor, Gary Locke, called the walkouts illegal and said he would seek a court injunction if state services were affected. The governor has proposed raises of 2.2 percent for the first year and 2.5 percent the next year. State workers are demanding wage increases of 3.7 percent starting in July and another 3.1 percent next year—equivalent to raises granted in last fall's teacher contracts. The state legislature adjourned April 22 without acting on the union's demands.

American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees President Gerald McEntee addressed a rally of 1,500 state workers Sunday in front of the state capitol in Olympia. Following the rally the union announced that the rolling strikes were being suspended.

Hawaii college faculty settle, while public school strike continues

Striking faculty at the University of Hawaii accepted a two-year contract April 18. The agreement contains across-the-board pay increases for professors and a 3 percent increase

for lecturers, who were initially excluded from receiving a raise. The agreement also includes a 2 percent merit-increase clause.

Three thousand University of Hawaii faculty struck April 5 alongside the state's 12,000 public school teachers. Negotiations are continuing in the teachers walkout under the auspices of a federal mediator. The strike has affected 180,000 students. A US district court judge has threatened to intervene against the striking teachers if the walkout continues through the week.

Pilots reach tentative deal at Delta

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) and Delta Air Lines reached a tentative agreement on Sunday. ALPA, which represents the airline's 9,800 pilots, said the contract includes pay increases of 24-34 percent for Delta pilots between now and 2005 and increases of 63 percent by 2005 for pilots at Delta Express, the carrier's lower-cost unit. Union officials also reported the pact includes improvements in retirement, job security and vacation benefits. ALPA members are expected to vote on the pact by July.

If approved, the deal would make Delta pilots the highest paid in the industry. The agreement was reached after five days of talks with the National Mediation Board. Delta pilots had threatened to strike as early as April 29 if no contract were reached. The airline had been lobbying President Bush to appoint a presidential emergency board under the Railway Labor Act, which could have delayed a strike by an additional 60 days.

Striking pilots at the Delta subsidiary Comair are set to resume negotiations this week, the first since the walkout began. The strike is in its fifth week.

Judge threatens to fine striking New Jersey school employees

A State Superior Court judge threatened April 19 to impose fines of \$200 a day against striking teachers and staff members at a Manville, New Jersey school after they ignored his return to work order. The 152 teachers, nurses, custodians and secretaries rejected a contract by a state fact-finder that proposed raises of 3.8 percent in the first year and 4.1 percent in the second, with freezes in the remaining two years of a four-year contract.

The board of education has attempted to keep the schools open using administrators and substitute teachers.

Manville teachers rank seventeenth in pay among 18 school districts in Somerset County. The administration says it can't afford the pay raises demanded by the teachers because Manville is less affluent than other cities in the county.

Part-time professors unionize at New England college

Part-time professors at Emerson College in Boston voted overwhelmingly to unionize April 17 after a year of

organizing and picketing. The unionizing drive emerged out of a growing recognition among the professors that—far from providing a bridge to full-time positions—part-time status at private colleges provides them with low pay, heavy schedules, little or no health care or retirement benefits, and no job security.

Nearly half the professors at Emerson are part-timers. This mirrors a general trend throughout New England and the nation as educational institutions gear themselves toward the market and seek to increase exploitation of faculty and staff. The US Department of Education reports that two-thirds of all professors hired between 1995 and 1997 were non-tenured and part-time.

Strike forces closure of Toronto schools

All 565 public schools in Toronto are being closed as a result of the three-week-old strike by support staff. While many schools had unofficially shut down over the course of the strike, the Toronto District School board had until now insisted that schools stay open. But by last Wednesday, conditions in the schools had become so intolerable they were compelled to take an emergency vote to close all schools affected by the strike.

The strike by 13,000 support staff began on April 1 and includes janitors, secretaries and some teachers. The strikers, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are seeking a wage increase of 8 percent over two years and guarantees against contracting out of jobs. The board is offering only 6.2 percent over three years. Negotiations with the school board bogged down last week and there is no indication that the strike will be settled soon.

Hydro workers wildcat in British Columbia

A number of wildcat strikes by electrical workers broke out last week at locations across the province of British Columbia against B.C. Hydro. Workers are upset by a tentative contract reached two weeks ago between their union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and the utility, which they say falls far short in wage provisions. B.C. Hydro has appealed to the Labour Relations Board to force the strikers back on the job.



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