

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 May 2001

Argentine airline strike

Airline mechanics went on strike April 24 against Austral and Aerolineas Argentinas, two major Argentine airlines. The strike affects both domestic and international flights.

The association of Airline Technical Personnel (APTA) organized the strike to protest the layoff of 220 workers due to cost cutting by the airline's Spanish holding company, the State Society of Industrial Participation (SEPI).

Aerolineas Argentinas, privatized with no debts during the Menem administration, is now mired in a debt of \$800 million. SEPI announced in Spain that 1,315 workers, out of a total of 6,500, would be sacked. This includes 250 APTA members (maintenance workers and cabin attendants). Another five unions have agreed to the voluntary layoff of 700 workers.

Two dead in transport workers strike in Bolivia

A 24-hour strike by transport workers in Bolivia ended with the death of two workers as a result of confrontations with the police.

In the city of El Alto, Daniel Vela Cuba, a 48-year-old driver, died when a police tear gas grenade hit him on the head. Also killed was Antonia Mamani, 89, who died from the effect of tear gas when police tried to break up a demonstration.

The protest centered around the method for issuing licenses for new transport lines by municipalities. The workers are also demanding the resignation of the government's superintendent of transportation.

The strikers virtually paralyzed the country's major cities. In La Paz, Bolivia's capital, the protests began with marches from Los Altos, Villa Fatima and Villa San Antonio towards the center of town. The marchers blockaded the major intersections.

Bank workers strike in Brazil

The leader of a bank union in Brazil warned on April 24 that the employees of BANESPA, the Brazilian branch of Banco Santander Central Hispano S.A., could extend their strike.

The comments by Bank Workers Union President Eduardo Rondino came following a six-hour strike by the 15,000 workers of the Banco do Estado de Sao Paulo, BANESPA.

The workers were protesting the voluntary package of layoffs that was offered to 80 percent of the workers the week before. In an interview Rondino commented, "I believe that in the next 30 to 60 days we will have a big strike to paralyze the bank if BSCH does not address our demands."

Workers in Mexico repudiate new tax

The Congress of Labor of Veracruz (COV) announced that the main theme of its May 1 parade will be the struggle against the extension of the Value Added Tax to food and medicine. COV President Emilio Morales declared that 30,000 workers from 15 unions are expected to march in the port city of Veracruz.

He also invited contingents from the organization of street peddlers and other middle class groups and political parties to repudiate the neoliberal policies of the Mexican state.

The 10-kilometer march is planned to last four hours. In addition to the fight against the extended VAT, the traditional display of quilts will also take place, in honor of the Haymarket martyrs in whose memory May Day

was established. Also honored will be the copper workers at Cananea and the textile workers of Rio Blanco, whose struggles helped initiate the Mexican Revolution of 1911.

Ecuadorian power workers protest privatization

Some 1,000 Ecuadorian power workers demonstrated in the nation's capital of Quito to protest the government's plan to privatize the country's electric industry. The workers charge that the government of President Gustavo Noboa is prepared to auction off the six different state-owned hydroelectric and thermal plants and one private company at bargain prices to private concerns. The result will be a slashing of jobs and living standards for the industry's 7,000 workers.

In the past, Ecuadorians have paid only 30 percent of electric costs while the remainder has been subsidized by the government. The government's privatization agency has advocated an immediate end to subsidies that would make the industry more attractive to investors. However, the electric council which administers the industry has insisted on gradual rate increases in an effort to avoid social upheaval against the measure.

Educators strike in Venezuela collapses

On April 26 education workers in Venezuela's second largest city initiated a strike of indefinite duration. However teachers in many cities, including Valencia, Venezuela's second largest city, went to work as usual.

The purpose of the strike had been to pressure the Ministry of Education to jump-start negotiations by presenting concrete responses to education workers' demands. These include the equalization of wages across Venezuela, a raise that goes beyond the 10 percent decreed by the government and better benefits. Many teachers are also owed back wages.

The strike was to have been the prelude to a "great march on Caracas" by educators from across the nation.

It is not clear why the strike failed. Preliminary reports indicate that there was confusion over the strike and the march, with different unions making contradictory announcements. Education workers interviewed by one of the Valencia dailies also indicated concern that this late in the year the consequences of a long strike would be very serious for students.

Strike deadline looms for Hollywood screenwriters

Negotiators for the Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers met throughout the weekend but still have not reached an agreement to avert a walkout midnight Tuesday that would halt TV and movie production. Talks ended Sunday evening with a \$100 million gap remaining between the two sides.

Talks between the 11,000-member Writers Guild and the producers alliance began January 22, but halted March 1 amid disagreements over how much residual pay studios owe writers when films or TV shows are broadcast overseas or rerun domestically. The writers also want more money from videocassettes and DVDs. Negotiations resumed April 17 and continued Sunday.

Hollywood has been preparing for a labor dispute with the screenwriters, as well as two performers' unions—the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists—whose contracts expire on June 30. For months studios have been rushing film shoots and trying, mostly in vain, to stockpile scripts. TV networks say

they may rely on more reality programming to make up for a lack of scripted shows.

Industry analysts have said the Writers Guild might extend its contract until late June, when the actors' contracts are set to expire.

Pilots union finalizes agreement to pay fine to American Airlines

The Allied Pilots Association came to an agreement April 27 on payment to American Airlines of a draconian \$45.5 million fine imposed by a federal judge for an 11-day sick-out in early 1999. The union handed over \$20 million already set aside in an escrow account, plus interest. The remaining \$20.5 million will be repaid with interest over the next 15 years. In return, American will drop claims against 25 union officials.

Meanwhile, American airlines will restart talks May 3 with its 23,000 flight attendants who have been without a contract for the last two years. Union members authorized strike action back in February if the airline did not come to an agreement over retirement benefits and work rules.

Opposition by pilots to Delta contract

While the recent agreement between Delta Air Lines and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) has been touted as establishing a new benchmark in pilots' salaries, a section of Delta pilots are already voicing opposition to the agreement. Many pilots charge the pay rate, which is one percent above last year's agreement that made United pilots the highest paid, covers up other substandard provisions of the pact.

The agreement lets stand a lower wage scale that is paid to pilots at the company's low fair unit, Delta Express. The pact also allows Delta to put up to 75 70-seat regional jets into the air. The United contract barred the airlines from flying regional jets with more than 50 seats. The United contract also gave its pilots job security from layoffs. The Delta agreement only protects pilots employed at the time of the contract signing.

A meeting of about 100 Delta pilots in Orlando, Florida last week passed a nonbinding resolution opposing the agreement. The opposition is strong enough that some anticipate Delta's pilot council may reject the agreement, opening the door to a strike threat and possible intervention by the Bush administration.

Delta flight attendants consider unionization

Some 22,000 flight attendants at Delta Air Lines are rumored to be considering unionization in the wake of 24-34 percent wage gains proposed in the tentative agreement with the company's pilots. Flight attendants are also conscious that Delta may be compelled to acquire another airline division if United obtains approval for its \$11.6 billion acquisition of US Airways. Such a move would create conditions under which Delta would seek to benefit from pitting its flight attendants against those of a potential merger client over wages, jobs and working conditions.

Meanwhile negotiations between Delta's regional carrier, Comair, and the Air Line Pilots Association resumed. Comair's 1,350 pilots struck March 26 over work rules, retirement, job security and wage compensation.

Gigante grocery chain agrees to union contract

The supermarket chain Grupo Gigante and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union reached an agreement on its first contract April 27 covering three stores in the Los Angeles area. After a two-year union campaign the Mexico City-based company agreed to a contract that will pay full- and part-time workers with higher seniority \$10.69 an hour and \$3 per hour for family health benefits. Current wages at Gigante have hovered around the state's minimum wage of \$6.25 an hour.

The contract falls far short of the \$20-per-hour UFCW contracts at other supermarket chains. Years of collaboration with companies on the part of the UFCW have eroded the union's position in the grocery retail trade, where it once represented 80 percent of workers in the industry. In closing the deal the UFCW agreed to serve as an advertising arm of the company

and promote Gigante over its nonunion competitors.

Anheuser-Busch and Teamsters settle brewery contract

Anheuser-Busch announced it has reached an agreement with the Teamsters union covering 7,000 unionized workers at its 12 US breweries. The company did not issue specifics on the contract, but instead gave out averages. According to Anheuser-Busch, average annual salaries will be \$66,000. Total compensation, which lumps healthcare and other costs with wages, will be an average \$50 per hour.

Based on similar averages, workers had been making \$65,000 a year and averaging \$47-48 an hour under a contract unilaterally implemented by the company two-and-a-half years ago when they reached an impasse. The company produces the trademark beers Budweiser and Michelob.

Hawaii school strike settled

The strike by 13,000 K-12 school teachers ended April 23 after the governor and the Hawaii State Teachers Association concluded a contract. The two-year contract would raise teachers' salaries from the yearly average \$29,000-\$58,000 to \$33,000-\$64,000. It also throws in a lump sum payment of \$1,100.

The agreement contains incremental raises based on seniority, with teachers holding master's degrees receiving an additional 3 percent and those with doctorates getting an additional 6 percent. Also included is the conversion of four days of instruction to professional development and a mentoring program, whereby higher seniority teachers would aid newer teachers in instruction.

The teachers were joined during the first days of their strike by University of Hawaii faculty. Combined, the two groups brought the entire educational system to a halt. A US district judge threatened to use a federal consent decree that mandates improvement in services to special-needs children to break the solidarity of teachers by reopening schools for this specific group of children. But the following day the two sides came to an agreement.

Washington state teachers to hold one-day strikes

Teachers in Seattle and other Washington state school districts will launch a series of work stoppages to protest a maneuver by Democratic Governor Gary Locke and state legislators who are refusing to fully fund measures approved by votes last November.

Seattle teachers, along with counterparts in the Issaquah and Tahoma school districts, will walk out May 2. Other districts will follow with separate one-day protests.

The two voter initiatives mandated cost-of-living increases for teachers and funding to lower class sizes. The governor has exploited a loophole, stating the measure only applies to those employees paid by the state. The Washington Education Association charges that this will bypass 25,000 teachers and other staff members whose salaries are covered by federal dollars and local money.

Harvard threatens disciplinary and police action against student occupation

Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine threatened 40 students with academic penalties if they did not give up their protest, which demands the New England school implement a "living wage" proposal to its lowest paid employees.

The students have occupied Massachusetts Hall, where Rudenstine's office is located, for nine days demanding that Harvard pay a minimum wage of \$10.25 an hour to its campus employees. Rudenstine says he will consider the proposal, but only after students give up their occupation and the college completes a new "study" of the issue. An unnamed Harvard official told the press that the institution would not rule out calling in police to remove protesters.

Ontario Tories legislate end to school strike

The Ontario provincial government has ordered an end to the strike by public school support workers which began on April 1 and will impose a contract through binding arbitration if an agreement is not reached within

seven days.

The strike by 13,000 cleaners, administrators and some teaching staff had forced the closure of 565 schools in the Toronto District School Board across the city last week. Despite pledges from the provincial government not to intervene in the strike, Labour Minister Chris Stockwell introduced legislation on Friday to order the strikers back to work. After some delaying tactics by the New Democratic Party, Bill 13 was passed by midnight with only the NDP voting against it.

The bill requires that striking workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) be back on the job within 48 hours, but it will be left to the school board to decide when schools will be opened. It is expected that caretakers will be the first back to work to begin the backlog of cleaning. The back-to-work order also covers CUPE support workers in Windsor who have been on strike for five weeks.

British Columbia nurses renew overtime ban

In the three-week-old battle between the British Columbia nurses union and the NDP provincial government, nurses across the province withdrew overtime services last weekend for the third time, requiring 1,000 hospital beds to close. The 26,000 registered and psychiatric nurses in the province are in a contract battle over wages, non-nursing duties and excessive overtime.

Saskatchewan hotel strike targets royal visit

An ongoing strike by 132 employees at the Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina diverted a planned stay by the Prince of Wales last week. The prince had been scheduled to stay at the luxury hotel, but due to the strike was forced to take more modest accommodations at a smaller hotel in the city.

The striking workers are members of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union and are fighting for wage improvements at the hotel, which has remained operating throughout their strike. Workers at the hotel where the prince was diverted had scheduled a demonstration, but canceled their plans at the last minute.



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