

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 May 2001

Airline strike ends in Argentina

On May 3, following 10 days on strike, airline mechanics and cabin attendants returned to work at Aerolineas Argentinas and Austral airlines under a government mandated mediation. The layoff of some 500 workers was rescinded while negotiations continue. Under the terms of the law, the parties have 10 days to reach an agreement.

Aerolineas, once a flagship of Argentine air travel with a good reputation for safety, was sold during the Menem administration to Iberia Airlines. The deal involved a leveraged buyout which allowed Iberia to liquidate Argentine assets to pay for the purchase. The owners of the now-crippled airline insist that layoffs are the only alternative to the shutdown of the carrier.

Soccer players to strike in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil

As the prestigious South American Libertadores Cup goes into its second round, soccer players in Argentina decided not to play on May 6 and not to play in the cup tournament beyond May 16.

On May 5, a players assembly rejected a promise by the club owners to immediately pay 35 percent of what players are owed with the balance to be paid July 30.

In La Paz, Bolivia, players of the Strongest team also struck May 3 over nonpayment of bonuses. In Sao Paulo, Gislande Nunes, spokesperson for the football players union, said that Brazilian players may also go on strike over the same economic issues as their colleagues to the south, nonpayment of bonuses and salaries. She called on players to show courage: "We need to unite the big and small players."

Transit workers union in Brazil asks for public support

Sao Paulo transit workers will stage rolling walkouts on May 8. Those busses that do operate will not charge fares. Edvaldo Santiago, the leader of the transit workers, asked for the support of riders during the day of protest.

Employers are offering a 4 percent raise, while the union, which represents 50,000 workers, has demanded a 5 percent raise, a 7.1 percent cost-of-living adjustment and a 5 percent productivity raise, plus a reduction in working hours.

Education workers and steelworkers strike in Venezuela

Despite last-minute wage offers by the Hugo Chavez administration, teachers and steelworkers in Venezuela walked off their jobs on May 2. Leaders of seven education unions rejected a 15 percent wage offer, insisting that education workers need a 45 percent raise to make their wages comparable to those in other government agencies. This is the third strike by education workers in the last two months.

The strike of 6,000 steelworkers against Siderurgica del Orinoco (SIDOR), Venezuela's most important steel producer, began on May 1. On May 4, Ramon Machuca, president of the United Steelworkers Union (SUTISS), announced the suspension of negotiations until further notice. He also said that steelworkers would remain on strike until negotiations are reactivated.

Because SIDOR is part of a steel trust that includes Hylsamex of Mexico, Siderar of Argentina, Sivena of Venezuela and Usiminas of Brazil, the strike is having continental effects. SIDOR has faced 10 strikes in the last 18 months.

Screenwriters reach tentative agreement

The Writers Guild and negotiators for the film and television industry reached a tentative agreement covering 11,000 writers who produce scripts for the industry's shows and movies. The pact provides for minimum salaries to be increased by 3.5 percent each year during the three-year agreement. The agreement undermines any solidarity action with 135,000 TV and film actors whose contract expires in June.

The most contentious part of the bargaining was over residual formulas. While the union expanded into new areas, it did not dramatically enrich formulas, as union members had demanded, for such things as films shown on videocassette and DVD.

In the past, when film or TV shows were aired in foreign countries, residuals were "capped" so that writers only received payments for initial airings and nothing for subsequent replays. According to the union the new agreement ends the cap and provides residuals in perpetuity.

Scripts for HBO and Showtime will pay much more in coming years. Previously writers earned less than \$300,000. This figure is to increase to \$4 million by the third year of the contract. The Fox TV network lost its lower scale, which paid two-thirds the residual rate of ABC, NBC and CBS. Residuals for shows on basic cable were also slightly increased to provide \$850,000 over the next three years.

New York City teachers union proposes compromise on merit pay

Under pressure from the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the United Federation of Teachers, which represents 80,000 New York City teachers, took a step away from its long-held opposition to merit pay by proposing a bonus formula. The union floated a proposal that would provide for all teachers in a given school to receive merit pay in the form of a bonus when improvement is shown.

The Giuliani administration has pressed for individualized merit pay that would single out some teachers while bypassing others within each school. Merit pay has been a formula for school administrators to slash pay to teachers while scapegoating them for academic results that are a product of deteriorating social conditions, particularly in the poorest neighborhoods.

It is not clear that the compromise will clear the way for granting raises of 15 to 20 percent that teachers are seeking in an effort to close the gap between inner city and suburban teachers.

Delta pilots union officials approve contract

The master executive council for 9,800 pilots at Delta Air Lines approved the tentative agreement negotiated between the company and the Air Line Pilots Association. The action clears the way for a ratification vote by the union's pilots.

The five-year proposal provides for raises of 24 to 34 percent, making them the highest paid pilots in the airline industry. But this has not muffled rank-and-file opposition to the contract on the grounds that it has inferior terms in relation to retirement benefits, crew scheduling and a lower pay scale for pilots at the airline's low-cost regional division, Delta Express. Pilots fear that Delta will ax the jobs of higher paid pilots while expanding the number of flights at Delta Express.

The pilots union will hold a series of meetings with Delta pilots in an effort to sell the agreement. Pilots are scheduled to vote on the proposal from May 22 through June 20.

Meanwhile, federal mediators issued a proposed settlement May 4

aimed at bringing the strike by 1,350 pilots at Comair to a close. Comair, a low-cost Delta subsidiary, announced it accepted the proposal while the Air Line Pilots Association has agreed to submit it to union pilots for ratification without endorsing the contents.

Harvard campus workers demonstrate

Harvard janitors and dining hall workers demonstrated their support for higher pay May 2 while 35 Harvard students continued the occupation of the campus's main executive building. They are demanding that the administration pay its lowest paid workers a "living wage."

A large number of janitors held a demonstration in front of Harvard Medical School protesting the institution's decision to contract out 80 jobs to a private company. Meanwhile, 200 dining hall service workers voted unanimously to authorize the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 26 to call a strike if current negotiations do not produce an acceptable contract.

For more than a year a group of Harvard students, appalled by miserly rates paid to campus workers, has lobbied the administration to adhere to the "living wage" formula adopted by the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts two years ago. On April 18, after a long period of failed negotiations, some 50 Harvard students occupied Massachusetts Hall where the university president has his offices.

New York delicatessens sued for violating wage laws

The New York State Attorney General sued the owners of three Manhattan delicatessens for \$500,000, citing their failure to pay workers minimum wages and overtime during a six-year period. The suit charges the owners paid 31 workers wages as low as \$2.61 an hour while working them 70-hour weeks—well under the state minimum of \$5.15 an hour. Part of the settlement requires back pay to the workers.

Owners of the delis have fiercely resisted a campaign by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) to organize workers in the grocery and deli industry. One owner, Jacob Han, is charged with threatening pro-union workers with physical violence, bribery or arrest. One shop, Abigail, closed its doors in response to the suit. The state has concluded settlements with three other delis that totaled \$164,000.

Talks resume between flight attendants and American Airlines

Mediated negotiations between American Airlines and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) resumed May 3 in an effort to reach agreement over a midterm contract wage proposal covering 23,000 attendants. American insists no wage increase is necessary, while the AFA is looking for a wage increase above the 15 percent mark. If an agreement cannot be reached the two sides face a possible binding arbitration ruling.

The AFA accepted a 10-year contract proposal in 1997 that contained a clause calling for a mid-term wage adjustment. The AFA is using the negotiations to secure its position under conditions in which American is pursuing the acquisition of US Airways—a move the airline would use to cut jobs and work rules. The AFA contract contains language giving the union the right to review merger proposals.

School workers ratify contract after strike broken

Following the legislated return to work of striking support staff at Toronto public schools, workers have ratified a new contract, avoiding an enforced settlement by a government arbitrator. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which called off the strike, has said it will mount a legal challenge to the back-to-work legislation passed at the end of April.

The two-year deal reached between CUPE and the Toronto District School Board gives workers a wage increase of only 5.7 percent, well below the 8 percent the union was demanding to match the raise awarded Toronto teachers. Workers also failed to win any ground on the key issue of job security, although any future layoffs will be matched with an equal number of early retirement packages.

The four-week-old strike by 13,000 janitors, bus drivers and some teachers was brought to a close with the Ontario Tory government's

passage of Bill 13. The action was taken despite previous assurances from the government that it would not interfere in the labor dispute. In its final week, the strike forced all 565 schools across the city to close.

British Columbia government pledges raises for protesting nurses

In the run-up to the May 16 election, which the incumbent New Democratic Party administration is expected to lose soundly, Premier Ujjal Dosanjh has sought to quell unrest among the province's nurses with a promise of increased wage provisions.

The BC Nurses Union has been engaged in a job action since Easter weekend involving an intermittent moratorium on overtime to protest the excessively long hours they are required to work for inadequate pay. Last Friday the job action escalated to a full overtime ban, with nurses staging a four-hour walkout and protest march in Vancouver. The nurses union has lowered their wage demand to \$38 an hour from \$42, while the Health Employers' Association has offered only \$28 an hour by the end of a three-year contract.

The BC premier intervened in the dispute last week during a three-day campaign tour of the province, announcing that he has directed his finance minister to offer wages and benefits to nurses matching those of their counterparts in neighboring Alberta. The offer provoked condemnation from Liberal leader Gordon Campbell, who is expected to win the election.

Paperworkers union agrees to job cuts at strikebound Ontario sawmill

A strike by 220 workers at a sawmill in Sudbury, Ontario, which began last October, may be ending. A ratification vote on a new five-year contract is set for this week. The tentative deal includes layoffs of up to one quarter of the workforce at the mill, with early retirement packages for only a portion of those affected.

The striking workers are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union at the Nairn Centre plant, which is owned by the paper giant Domtar Inc. Even if the contract is ratified, it is expected it will take up to three months for the sawmill to resume full operation.



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