Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 May 2001

Highway barricades source of worry to Argentine authorities

The government of Argentina is discussing strategies to combat highways blockaded by the unemployed. During the week of May 7-14 there were highway protests in heavily industrial Buenos Aires and Cordoba as well as oil-rich Neuquen and Jujuy, an impoverished province on the Argentina-Bolivia frontier.

According to the Argentine daily *Clarin*, the administration of President Fernando De la Rua is concerned these protests are becoming more organized and sophisticated in their tactics.

The government has abandoned last year's strategy of creating jobs to stop the protests. It now insists on not negotiating with protesters as long as the barricades are in place. However, there are increasing fears that this policy will lead to social unrest on the part of the unemployed.

Bolivian crisis ends in agreement with unions

More than four weeks of demonstrations, strikes and marches by workers, peasants and students ended on May 11 with a pact between the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) and the government of Hugo Banzer.

The 15-point agreement includes a promise of a minimum wage adjustment and the creation of labor-government commissions to discuss placing controls on the neo-liberal free market measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

A COB spokesperson announced that it will lift an indefinite general strike of education and health workers, and cancel ongoing labor protests.

Education workers strike in Colombia

On May 9, Colombian educators launched a 48-hour national strike against a $4 billion budget cut demanded by the International Monetary Fund. The Pastrana government announced that it was proceeding with the budget cuts across the Andean nation. Union leaders indicated that if Congress approves the new cuts, over 1.5 million children would have no access to education. In addition, 2.5 million would lose subsidies to health services. They also declared that if the cuts go through there will be an indefinite strike of education workers, beginning May 15.

The educators' strike ended May 10 with a march through the streets of Bogota. That demonstration also included public health workers.

Slowdown in Mexico City

On May 9, public communications safety and health workers began a slowdown against the municipal authorities of Mexico City. The workers rallied at the Office of Social Communications to demand overtime pay, respect for workers rights, shorter working hours and that the promises made by Mexico City Mayor Andres Lopez Obrador during last year's elections be kept.

Obrador rejected the workers' demands, saying that current plans were part of a more general municipal labor policy elaborated by the city.

Venezuelan government may impose state of emergency

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez raised May 10 the possibility of imposing a state of emergency across that nation. Chavez presented the proposal as a way of addressing rampant poverty, malnutrition and poor health conditions in Venezuela. It is widely rumored that the announcement is in fact a response to the two-week-old strikes by educators and steelworkers.

The same day steelworkers at SIDOR rejected the latest offer by the company and refused to lift their strike. The workers are demanding a 20 percent raise plus a bonus of $4,200 for each of the 5,600 SIDOR workers. Fourth thousand nonunion temporary workers have also joined the strike. They are also demanding wage increases.

Striking Comair pilots reject contract proposal

Striking pilots at Comair rejected a federal mediator's proposal by a 10-1 margin May 12, as the work stoppage entered its fifth week. The overwhelming rejection came despite company threats, backed up by the Air Line Pilots Association, that the nation's third-largest regional carrier would respond by wiping out the jobs of 2,000 of the company's 4,000 non-striking employees immediately if the contract failed to pass. Comair has already eliminated 200 of the 1,300 jobs belonging to striking pilots. Delta Air Lines, which owns Comair, said it might even close the entire operation and sell off its fleet of jets.

According to the company, the agreement contained wage increases of between 13 and 30 percent in the first year and

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25.5 percent and 56.5 percent during the remainder of the four-and-a-half year agreement. Presently pilot salaries range from $16,000 to $70,000 a year.

Comair pilots are determined to considerably improve their contract. With the upgrading of regional carriers, many pilots are required to have the same skills as pilots for large carriers, where some receive annual salaries as high as $300,000. Pilots also want better retirement benefits and work rules. Major complaints include the policy of requiring pilots to be on-call without pay and being compelled to work three days of solid flying without adequate rest.

Pulp and paper workers strike Weyerhauser

Over 1,300 pulp and paper workers at four plants in Oregon and Washington state struck the Weyerhauser Co. May 8 over wage, pension, benefits and job security. Federally mediated negotiations between Weyerhauser and the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers broke off after the company returned to a job security issue and put it back on the table.

The union claims that in April it made concessions on other items in order to resolve the issue. The strike affects plants at Longview and Cosmopolis in Washington State, and Springfield and North Bend, Oregon. Weyerhauser is seeking to obtain a wider latitude to ax union jobs and use outside contractors to replace them.

The dispute comes at the same time that Weyerhauser has intensified its $5.45 billion hostile takeover attempt of Portland-based Willamette Industries. Willamette owns 105 plants in the US, France, Ireland and Mexico. Weyerhauser has operations in the US, Canada and 15 other countries. A merger with Willamette would make them the second-largest forest products company in the world.

Harvard sit-in for “living wage” ends

Some 30 students ended their three-week occupation of Harvard University's central administration offices. The sit-in did not achieve its original demand of an immediate wage increase for some 2,000 employees who work as custodians or dining hall workers to $10.25, a figure that some studies claim is the minimum amount required by a worker to live in the Cambridge area where the elite school is located.

In a deal brokered by AFL-CIO lawyers and administration officials, the students were asked to end their protest in exchange for the formation of a 20-member committee to review the school's compensation practices. Chaired by an economics professor, the committee is to be comprised of 11 faculty members, 2 senior administrators, 2 undergraduates, 2 graduates and 3 union workers. The agreement raised the possibility of retroactive pay for janitors, a reexamination of health insurance co-pays and a freeze on the subcontracting of jobs to outside firms until a labor contract is reached. The committee will convene June 8 and report its findings December 19.

Spokespersons for the administration made clear that it had not agreed to anything. The university's objective had been to end the occupation. Students who took part in the occupation are still subject to administrative sanctions.

Northwest mechanics ratify contract

Officials for Northwest Airlines and the union representing 9,300 mechanics and cleaners signed a four-year contract May11, just two days after workers voted by an 82 percent margin to accept the new agreement.

Mechanics will receive an immediate 24.4 percent wage increase that will accumulate to 37 percent by the time the contract expires in 2005. For those with the highest seniority, this will translate into a base salary of about $77,500. Cleaners received lower raises.

Pension benefits will get a 112 percent increase and the agreement includes a no-layoff clause and places a cap on how much work Northwest can shift to outside contractors. The union did not get retroactive pay. Instead a 3.5 percent formula was applied to a worker's total accumulated pay received since 1996. Mechanics will receive a lump sum of about $10,000 and cleaners a lower amount averaging $6,603.

The negotiations came after a decade in which workers suffered wage concessions followed by years of no wage increase. Two years ago, workers rebelled when the International Association of Machinists attempted to push through a substandard contract. The IAM was subsequently decertified and AMFA elected to take its place.

Kansas Boeing workers approve contract

Some 4,200 office and technical workers at Boeing's Wichita, Kansas plant ratified their first union contract by an 81 percent margin. Wages will go up by 4.5 percent in each of the next two years and 5 percent in the final year of a three-year agreement. The agreement also contained a $1,500 signing bonus, lower co-pays for health insurance and a ceiling on health insurance deductions for workers.

The Wichita workers joined the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace during the strike by 17,000 technical workers in Washington state and other Boeing locations around the country.

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