Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 May 2001

Violent protests in the Dominican Republic

Protests over the lack of public services and police killings of civilians have turned violent in the poor districts of Santo Domingo and in the interior of the Dominican Republic.

As of May 25, four people had been killed in the protests and twenty had been wounded. In the working class Capotillo district of Santo Domingo clashes took place as protesters battled police after a 17-year-old youth, Laury Amancio Medina, was killed by police. The police alleged they were trying to arrest cocaine dealers.

Protests over the killing took place in other Santo Domingo neighborhoods. Street protests also took place over a 15-hour-long electrical blackout. The demonstrators set up barricades that interrupted traffic to the airport.

On Saturday, parts of Santo Domingo were being patrolled by large police contingents to prevent a protest march against police repression. Workers and youth are demanding increases in public amenities in the poor districts of Santo Domingo. The protesters also want an end to the heavy-handed police tactics that led to the killing of the four demonstrators last week.

Oaxaca, Mexico educators protest

On Saturday, May 28, 15,000 protesting teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico blocked highways with barricades for over five hours to demand increases in wages and in the school budget. Oaxaca is one of Mexico's most impoverished regions, with a high Indian population, 95 percent of whom live under the poverty line.

The education workers rallied in Oaxaca at 10 a.m. and split up into three columns that headed toward key highways. Under heavy rain, they placed stones and tree trunks in the streets to prevent cars and trucks from moving. After five hours the teachers removed the barricades.

The Oaxaca teachers, who have been protesting for 10 days, are demanding a 100 percent raise, the creation of a breakfast program for their students, scholarships for their students and up-to-date textbooks. A delegation of teachers was sent to Mexico City, to camp out in front of the Department of Education building together with teachers from other southern Mexican States.

The press pecretary of Section 22 of the educators union (SNTE), Jose Villavicencio, announced that the teachers would escalate their tactics on May 28. Teachers plan to strike for 24 hours, then for 48 hours. If their issues are not addressed, they will then launch an indefinite strike.

Electricians to strike in Brazil

The union that represents 30,000 workers at the Brazilian utility Electrobras announced plans to strike on June 1. The union stated that the government has ignored their demands, presented in April. Electrical workers, who have not had a raise in six years, are demanding an increase of 7 percent over inflation.

Nicaraguan union fights political victimization

The union that represents employees of the Supreme Electoral Council announced that it will call a strike unless four technicians, fired for being supporters of the bourgeois nationalist Sandinistas, are reinstated. “This is an injustice,” declared Elmer Torres, leader of the CSE union, “people have the right to think as they wish. These are professional technicians that have been on the job for a long time.”

The union plans to take its case before human rights commissions and is considering which government department to shut down with a strike. Torres also announced that an appeal will go out for support from the National Workers Front (FNT) for broader job actions.

LTV Steel demands concessions

LTV Steel Corporation issued a letter to union steelworkers warning that jobs will be cut, medical benefits slashed and pension benefits for active and retired workers reduced unless the United Steelworkers (USW) union makes radical contract concessions.

The threatening letter came during a recess in talks between the USW and negotiators for LTV taking place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “If we do not act quickly, LTV Steel will shut down,” said the letter from company Chairman William Bricker and COO John Turner. LTV has been operating under bankruptcy court proceeding since December 29 and is losing $2 million a day and claims it needs to find $800 million a year in savings.

The company expects to extract $261 million a year in contract concessions from the steelworkers. Among the proposed changes by the company are reductions in health care for retirees, elimination of future pay increases and the dropping of pension increases for the current year. The company has already announced the closing of the steel mill at its Cleveland Works, resulting in the loss of 900 jobs. LTV presently employs 17,000 workers at facilities in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Illinois.

Mediators offer binding arbitration at American Airlines

Federal mediators declared an impasse May 24 in the two-year-long negotiations between American Airlines and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants and offered binding arbitration. American has accepted arbitration but the union representing 23,000 flight attendants said it would postpone its decision until next week. It is believed the union will reject arbitration, thereby triggering a 30-day cooling off period that must precede a strike.

According to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, the union's decision guarantees there will not be a strike at American during the critical summer vacation period. If a deal is not reached the 30-day cooling off period could be followed by the appointment by President Bush of an emergency board, an action that would delay a strike by another 60 days—that is, until after the busy Labor Day holiday.

The talks have stalled over pay raises. Last November, American offered a 15.3 percent raise over the course of a five-year contract. Most recently, the airline simply added an extra year to the agreement with an offer of 21.6 percent over six years, something the flight attendants have indicated they will not accept.

Contract talks extended at St. Louis Boeing plant

Boeing and the union representing 3,200 machinists at its St. Louis plant agreed to extend contract talks until June 3. The decision came four days after members of District 837 of the International Association of Machinists voted by a 79 percent margin to reject the company's latest contract offer.

Workers were strongly opposed to Boeing's demand for the merging of job classifications, a move that would pave the way for job reductions. The company offered a 3 percent wage increase in the first year of the

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new agreement and 3 percent lump sum payments in the remaining two years. Pension benefits were raised from $41 per year of service to $50 and the company agreed to increase the amount at which it matches 401(k) contributions. At a meeting on May 20 workers voted 1,659 to 543 to authorize a strike. If new negotiations fail to produce an acceptable agreement, workers could strike as early as July 4.

Comair management seeks to divide strikers

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) reports that management officials for Comair, the strikebound regional airline owned by Delta, have been privately calling striking pilots and pressuring pilots to accept company terms while simultaneously making covert threats.

Managers have been floating the idea that company negotiators would increase retroactive pay if the pilots union dropped the proposal for a company-funded retirement plan. ALPA reports that Comair has been focusing their pressure campaign on pilots with family members dependent on medical insurance and who may now be finding themselves hard-pressed to maintain health care coverage.

Comair management said their tactics were simply seeking “feedback” from pilots. The company's move came after the 1,350 striking pilots overwhelmingly rejected a contract proposal arrived at by federal mediators. Comair pilots struck on March 26. The company responded by canceling its flight schedules and laying off 2,000 out of 4,000 non-striking workers and eliminating 200 pilot positions.

Partial settlement in Lockheed racial discrimination suit

Black workers at Lockheed Martin's plants settled their claims against the International Association of Machinists. The workers charged the union with abetting racial discrimination by the defense contractor. The agreement now paves the way for setting a hearing by a federal judge on the workers' claims against Lockheed.

In May 2000, lawyers filed two lawsuits—one for hourly workers and a second for salaried workers—which outlined more than 100 complaints of discrimination at Lockheed plants from South Carolina to Texas. The lawsuits alleged that qualified workers were denied promotions, raises and training while receiving substandard pay and were passed over for overtime pay. Workers were also reportedly taunted with racial slurs, given “back to Africa” tickets and nooses were placed on their lockers. At a press conference, presided over by lawyer Johnnie Cochran, posters from one plant were displayed, including one inviting white employees to join the Ku Klux Klan. Lockheed denied the allegations.

Workers charged that certain officials of the Machinists union did not oppose the company's vendetta against black workers. The settlement with the IAM calls for the formation of a five-member “human rights committee” of Lockheed employees at the defense contractor's Marietta plant. Some union officials will undergo so-called diversity training. The union has also agreed to turn over files of complaints that will help bolster the charges of discrimination by workers against the company.

TWA to pay $2.6 million in sexual harassment suit

Trans World Airlines agreed to pay $2.6 million May 24 to settle a lawsuit filed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) on behalf of nine female employees who charged airline management with sexual harassment.

The women, who worked in ground traffic control, passenger service and maintenance at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City, said their supervisors engaged in “severe and repeated sexually offensive conduct, such as unsolicited touching, sexual propositions, exposing their genitals, lewd comments, and abusive or offensive language.” This took place even while the victims were in direct control of ground traffic.

When the harassment activities were reported to TWA management, the company did nothing to halt the behavior. In some cases TWA took retaliatory action against those attempting to defend themselves against the harassment. Under the settlement TWA admits no wrongdoing. In addition, the airline has agreed to set aside $1.1 million for the settlement of future cases should other employees step forward in the wake of the May 24 settlement. The resolution of the case comes following last month's acquisition of TWA by American Airlines.

Teamsters official accused of diverting union jobs to brother's temporary firm

A Teamsters oversight panel issued a report alleging that the brother of a union official offered thousands of dollars in kickbacks in return for the favor of diverting union convention jobs in Las Vegas to his temporary labor firm. William Hogan, an official of Teamsters Local 631 and an aid to President James P. Hoffa, is accused of pressuring his local to accept the offer on behalf of his brother, Mike Hogan of United Services Co. While the local did not accept the kickbacks, it did divert some of the jobs to the temporary labor firm.

Ontario nurses threaten job action

Contract talks between the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) and the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) broke down this past weekend, raising expectations that nurses will begin limited job actions, such as overtime bans, in the coming days.

The collapse of negotiations for a contract affecting over 40,000 health care workers in the province will likely mean that the dispute will be sent to binding arbitration over the coming months. While some agreement was reached on monetary issues, the union says that management has made no concessions in key areas such as wages, benefits or job security, and in particular the requirement of mandatory overtime. The ONA has been seeking the hiring of more nurses to alleviate the intolerable burden now being place on existing nursing staff.

Auto workers reach settlement with Canadian Labour Congress

A tentative resolution was announced last week in the dispute between the largest private sector union in the country, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and a union within the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the national governing trade union body. The settlement could bring an end to the jurisdictional conflict within the labor bureaucracy, which began over a year ago.

In February of 2000 the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) brought charges against the CAW, claiming their membership was being raided. The SEIU filed a complaint with the CLC, which in turn imposed sanctions against the CAW. The dispute escalated from there, with ensuing counter-sanctions and an increasingly bitter public battle, in which the CAW bureaucracy utilized anti-American chauvinism by pointing to the SEIU's affiliation to the American AFL-CIO. While no details of the agreement have been made public, both sides are declaring the tentative settlement a victory.

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