

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 June 2001

Airlines workers strike in Mexico

The union representing flight attendants at Mexico's largest airline, Aeromexico, came to an agreement with management June 3 after a two-day strike. The union accepted a 9 percent wage increase. Initially, the 1,500 workers demanded a wage increase of 30 percent, while management offered 6 percent.

The strike forced the airline to cancel 320 flights on its first day, leaving 25,000 passengers stranded. The airline claims losses of \$4.3 million in daily revenue. The administration of Vicente Fox chose not to intervene overtly into the dispute. In the past, Mexican governments have intervened in strikes against Aeromexico, using the pretext that the company is a key industry for the national economy.

Argentine Labor Ministry calls for contract renegotiations

The Argentine Labor Ministry intends to bring together over 230 unions to renegotiate their collective bargaining agreements to make them conform to changes in labor law. This move, demanded by the International Monetary Fund, as a condition of their continuing economic help for Argentina, will affect all contracts that date from before 1998.

The purpose of the renegotiation is to implement measures that end industry-wide contracts, thus allowing smaller companies to cut wages and benefits all in the name of labor flexibility. In cases where no agreement is reached after a lengthy procedure, contracts would be abrogated and only the provisions mandated by the Law of Labor Contracts would apply.

Communications employees occupy company headquarters in Chile

On June 1, the Union of Telecomunicaciones de Chile Workers (STCTC) occupied the company headquarters to stop the layoff of one thousand workers by the communications giant. The union has also threatened to strike. On May 31 the firm fired several managers as part of a company-wide reorganization. While a CTC spokesperson could not confirm how many workers will be sacked, the layoffs are already taking place.

Strike paralyzes Chilean copper mine

Strikers shut down the Radomiro Tomic copper mine in Calama, Chile, 2000 kilometers north of Santiago, in a walkout over wages. An meeting of 400 workers rejected an eleventh hour proposal by management to readjust wages and increase productivity pay by 3 percent, according to union leader Luis Galvez. The union is demanding a 46 percent raise in wages, productivity pay and benefits.

The miners had been conducting a slow down since May 17 to spur management into addressing the workers' demands. The mine belongs to Chile's Copper Corporation (CODELCO) and produces 260,000 tons of pure copper every year.

Mexican education workers continue protest

About 500 members of the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) continue their protest across from Mexico's Senate, demanding that the legislative body address its social and salary

demands. On June 1, teachers, retired workers and students entered the Senate chambers chanting "this house is full of traitors!" Maria del Refugio Flores and Concepcion Baez, union leaders from the State of Michoacan, denounced the lack of action by the legislators on the teachers' demands.

The teachers are demanding free breakfasts and scholarships for their students, a budget increase for books and school facilities, and wage increases. In Mexico, as in most of Latin America, only the poor send their children to public schools. Teachers report rampant malnutrition among their students. Sixty percent of Mexico's 100 million people exist under the official poverty line.

Unions end bitter strike at Connecticut nursing homes

Negotiations continue in the wake of a return to work by 4,500 Connecticut nurses, nurse assistants, and food and maintenance workers at 40 nursing homes. Three of the nursing homes are refusing to rehire striking nurses while another 21 homes have not signed an agreement with the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199.

Nurses and staff workers struck on May 2 in an effort to pressure the state's governor and legislature to increase per-patient staffing levels and wages and funding to the hospitals. Seventy percent of the state's nursing home patients are Medicaid recipients. The state pays nursing homes approximately \$150 per day for these patients. Payments have been increased in the past but the union claims that funds have not been earmarked for wages and staffing levels. Nursing assistants complain that they are forced to care for 15 or 20 patients at a time while making a starting wage of \$11-\$13 an hour.

The nursing homes brought in United States Nursing Corporation of Denver, a company notorious for providing strikebreaking personnel to hospitals throughout the nation. Republican Governor John Rowland funded nursing homes to the tune of \$20 million during the two-week strike to underwrite strike costs and supply National Guardsmen to transport replacement workers to their jobs.

On May 14 strikers voted to return to work after Democratic legislators promised to increase funding earmarked for wages and staffing levels. Where District 1199 did secure agreements, nurses received an 18 percent increase over the life of a four-year contract. However, the union surrendered certain benefits with the result that actual increases only rose by 2.2 percent to 3.2 percent per year.

United Airlines to resume talks with mechanics

Officials for United Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 141-M are scheduled to resume contract talks this week in negotiations that have dragged on since December 1999. The talks come after federal negotiators refused to release the two sides from bargaining obligations in order to make way for a possible strike.

Mechanics at United make \$23 an hour, behind their counterparts at US Airways, who make \$26 an hour, and Northwest Airlines which recently settled a contract negotiated by the Aircraft Mechanics

Fraternal Association (AMFA) that makes their mechanics the highest paid at \$28 an hour. In March, AMFA submitted petition cards to the National Mediation Board that were signed by United Mechanics requesting an election to replace the IAM with AMFA as their bargaining representative.

Flight attendants reject arbitration at American Airlines

Union officials representing 23,000 flight attendants at American Airlines rejected an offer of binding arbitration by the National Mediation Board paving the way for the calling of a 30-day cooling-off period. American officials had accepted the offer of federal mediation last week.

If no agreement can be brokered during the cooling off period, flight attendants would be cleared for a strike at its conclusion. However, President George Bush has made it clear he would step in to postpone any strike at a major US carrier by calling an emergency board that would bar strike action for another 60 days. President Bush has long ties to executives of American's parent corporation, AMR, which is based in Dallas, Texas, where the president formerly served as governor. Last month, AMR chairman Donald Carty attended an exclusive dinner with Bush.

The union and company have yet to resolve salary, minimum pay, and health and life insurance issues, which amount to an estimated \$200 million. Flight attendants presently earn \$15,000 to \$35,000 a year.

Visteon workers charge age-discrimination

White-collar staff workers filed an age-discrimination lawsuit in Detroit, Michigan, against the auto parts supplier Visteon, for targeting older workers when it laid off 1,300 employees earlier this year.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs launched the suit after an analysis of half of Visteon's white-collar departments revealed that workers 56 and older were five times as likely to be laid off as those under 40 years of age. At the time of the layoffs, Visteon attributed the layoffs to part of the restructuring of the former Ford Motor Company parts division. The company claimed employees were evaluated based on how their skills matched the industry's future requirements.

Already, two similar class-action lawsuits were filed earlier this year against Ford by managers who received poor evaluations and no annual bonuses or pay raises. Victimized workers charge that the company based its reviews not on performance but instead favored younger managers over their elders.

New talks at Boeing St. Louis plant

Negotiations between the Boeing Company and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) on behalf of 3,200 workers at the company's operations in St. Louis Missouri, resumed May 30 in an effort to avoid a strike scheduled for June 4.

Machinists rejected the company's previous offer by a 3-1 margin on May 20. The St. Louis machinists are seeking wage and benefit compensation similar to machinists at Boeing's Seattle operations. The talks are being conducted while Boeing and another defense contractor, Lockheed Martin wait to see which of the two companies are awarded the contract for the Pentagon's \$300 billion Joint Strike Fighter. Should Boeing win the deal, the fighter would be constructed at its St. Louis plant.

Minnesota nurses strike

Nurses at two hospital locations in Minneapolis went on strike June 3 after rejecting a final offer from the hospitals' owner, Allina Health System. Some 7,700 nurses at 12 hospitals represented by the Minnesota Nurses Association were locked in negotiations until last

week when tentative settlements were reached and accepted at 10 hospitals.

But 1,300 registered nurses at Allina's Fairview Southdale and Fairview-University Medical Center rejected their proposal by an undisclosed margin. Nurses charged the agreement was little changed from a proposal that was voted down two weeks ago. Union members were dissatisfied with Allina's proposals to address staffing shortages and health insurance. The wage proposal of 19.8 percent over three years was also considered insufficient. Concerning staffing shortages, nurses didn't go for Allina's proposal to set up a labor-management committee to study the ratio of nurses to patients.

Alberta medics defy anti-strike ruling

Ambulance workers in Edmonton remain on strike despite a ruling by the Alberta Labour Relations Board declaring their job action illegal. The ruling by the provincial body was made the day before the 260 paramedics and emergency medical technicians went on strike last Friday, but a union vote on Saturday morning returned a 94 percent result in favor of continuing the strike.

The strikers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and are fighting for wage improvements of 21 percent and better working conditions. The city is offering only 10.2 percent over three years. The city has said it will use managers and ambulance workers from other cities, as replacements for the striking paramedics.

In advance of the decision to continue the strike, the emergency declaration by the board gave the city and the union 30 days to reach a settlement before imposing binding arbitration. In response to the union's defiance, Ralph Klein, the Tory premier of Alberta, sought to turn public opinion against strikers by shirking any governmental responsibility for the emergency medical care system and charging any mishap during the strike would be blamed on the union. The decision to continue the strike will subject union leaders to punitive fines, which have yet to be determined.

British Columbia health care workers continue job action

The campaign of rotating strikes and overtime bans which has been pursued over the past month will continue under the incoming Liberal government, according to the unions representing 40,000 health care professionals in this province.

Contract negotiations between the Health Employers Association of BC (HEABC) and the Paramedical Bargaining Association representing a number of unions have stalled. The unionsâ€”including the Health Sciences Association, Canadian Union of Public Employees, BC Government and Services Employees' Union, Professional Employees' Association, and the Hospital Employees' Unionâ€”hope to pressure the new government of Gordon Campbell to reach a deal in their ongoing dispute.

This week, during which the new government will be sworn in, there are plans for the withdrawal of services such as drug therapy, counseling and rehabilitation in centers across the province. It is also expected that the results of the ratification vote by nurses for a new contract with HEABC will be announced this week.



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