

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 June 2001

Fox government represses teachers in Mexico City

The National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) decided to barricade the National Commission of Human Rights on Monday, June 11 to protest government repression. Teachers that had been in negotiations at the Government Secretariat (SEGOB) were forcefully ejected on June 9. The teachers protest is now in its fourth week and involves sit-ins at the Education Ministry and other government buildings.

The protest involves teachers in the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, Sonora, Hidalgo, Michoacan and Guerrero. They are demanding higher wages and more money for their schools. On Sunday, June 10, CNTE contingents participated in demonstrations commemorating the Corpus Thursday Massacre of 1971. On the main avenues and parks of downtown Mexico City, teachers leafleted the local population, indicating that they do not intend to leave empty-handed.

On June 6 in the State of Oaxaca, striking teachers, members of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), sat in at state and federal government offices to protest the inadequate response to their demands. The educators lifted barricades as a show of good will to the public. They also took over a tollbooth on the Oaxaca-Cuacnopalan highway, and let vehicles pass without paying tolls. Monday's plan of action involved the occupation of different government agencies in Mexico City.

CNTE leaders denounced the Fox administration over Friday's incident for lacking "political sensitivity" and "having no interest in education."

Despite job actions, layoffs continue in Chile's Telefonica

Despite last week's protests, Chile's telecommunications giant *Telefonica* plans to lay off over 1,000 workers on June 11. Last week, workers had occupied *Telefonica's* offices. Labor leaders met with company executives throughout the week to no avail. Four hundred workers will be laid off from customer services, three hundred from the closure of an affiliate, and the rest throughout the company.

On Monday morning, 1,200 workers rallied in front of the company. A workers' assembly was to vote on strike action later that day.

Last year, the company, which employs 9,200 workers, reported that it lost \$187 million.

Colombian workers protest cuts in education and health services

On Thursday, June 7 thousands of teachers, doctors, workers and students protested in Bogota against a crucial agreement between the Colombian government and the International Monetary Fund. Angry demonstrators blocked roads and clashed with the police. The latter used tear gas to disperse the crowds.

Demonstrations had begun earlier in the week and got worse once it became known that the Colombian Congress had approved changes in the formula that the government uses to distribute money to cities.

Over 300,000 education workers and 90,000 health workers have been on strike against the proposal for more than three weeks. Rallies also took place in Cali, Medellin, Bucaramanga, and Barracabermejs.

The reform, which the workers say will gut education and health in Colombia, is a condition for a \$2.7 thousand million loan from the IMF. Under the agreement, the government of Andres Pastrana has committed itself to reducing its deficit from 3.6 percent of GDP to 2.8 percent.

Strattec workers strike in Milwaukee

Manufacturing workers at Strattec Security Corporation in Wisconsin went on strike June 7 after rejecting a contract recommended by both the company and their union. The plant's 480 workers rejected the terms covering wages, health insurance, profit sharing and a company proposal to consolidate job classifications.

The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union will seek to restart talks, but the company has moved its 275 salaried employees into manufacturing production. Strattec, which makes locks for vehicles produced by Chrysler, General Motors and Ford, also has an assembly plant in Mexico that supplies its North American market.

Flight attendant contract talks suspended at American

Talks between American Airlines and its flight attendants' union were suspended and will not resume until June 20. Negotiations have continued in the wake of a rejection of arbitration by the flight attendants, an action that has opened

up a 30-day cooling-off period, set to expire the week of July 4 after which attendants could legally strike.

If an agreement is not reached, it is anticipated that President Bush will step in by calling for the formation of a Presidential Emergency Board, further delaying any possible strike for at least another 60 days.

American has offered a 21.6 percent increase in base pay over six years, profit sharing and a 3 percent signing bonus. The union says that the company's proposal fails to measure up to wages won by Delta flight attendants and that scheduling and rest time have not been resolved.

New talks in Comair pilots strike

Negotiators for the regional airline, Comair, and the Air Line Pilots Association met with federal mediators in an effort to restart talks in the two-month-old strike by 1,350 pilots. Comair pilots walked out over salaries, benefits, shift duration and insufficient rest intervals between flights. They charge that their duties involve the same responsibilities as pilots who fly larger jets and they should be similarly compensated.

Comair, which is owned by Delta and is the United States' second largest regional airline, has responded to the strike by laying off 2,400 of its 4,000 non-striking workers and eliminating 400 pilot positions while selling off part of its fleet.

University of Washington teaching assistants continue strike

Some 1,600 teaching assistants at the University of Washington in Seattle continued their strike despite the breakdown of talks between university officials and the Graduate Student Employee Action Coalition. Teaching assistants launched their strike June 1 after negotiators for the university refused to grant the graduate students exclusive bargaining rights for their organization, which is backed by the United Auto Workers.

The teaching assistants are threatening to strike through June 15, the last day for their spring quarter obligations. Professors have been forced to cancel final exams or substitute alternate tests that would be easier to grade. Normally, the task of grading complex exams falls on the teacher assistants and the strikers are threatening to leave essays and final exams ungraded if a contract agreement is not reached.

Talks break down between United Airlines and mechanics

Contract talks between United Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 141-M broke down June 6. The two sides are expected to meet again June 20 under supervision of the National Mediation Board (NMB).

Earlier, the NMB refused a request by the IAM to release

them from talks, which would initiate a 30-day cooling-off period before a strike could be called. United's mechanics, who make \$23 an hour, are seeking to equal or surpass the industry-leading \$28 per hour mark attained by mechanics at Northwest Airlines.

Saskatchewan hospital workers on strike

As many as 14,000 health care workers across this prairie province went on strike Saturday morning after contract talks collapsed between the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The strike by CUPE members, which include lab technicians, security guards and housekeeping staff, involves health care workers and hospital staff in more than half the provincial health districts. In larger centers such as Regina some workers have been brought in as scab replacements by employers and some patients have been sent out of province.

Hospital workers had been engaged in an overtime ban up until Saturday, but the collapse of conciliated talks precipitated the strike. A key issue in the dispute is intolerable workloads and overtime requirements, but both sides are also far apart on pay increases. The union is asking for a 14 percent hike in wages and benefits and the employers are offering only a 9 percent increase over the term of a three year contract. Any new contract with CUPE may serve as a template for a number of other unions, which are also in contract negotiations with SAHO.

Gravel pit workers strike in British Columbia

Unionized workers went on strike last week against the Construction Aggregates' mining company at the giant gravel pit in Sechelt, British Columbia on the Pacific coast and the Construction Aggregates' Producers Pit outside Victoria, the provincial capital. The 90 striking workers include 44 members of the International Union of Operating Engineers, who walked out last Wednesday after talks broke down over wages.

While the company is offering wage increases of up to 2.9 percent a year in a four-year contract, union negotiators cite the company demand to pay new hires \$2.20 an hour below the base rate as a key issue of disagreement. With the building of a giant new deep sea port last year, it is expected that the company may expand production by as much as three times over the term of a new contract. Workers have been without a contract since March and no new talks are currently scheduled.



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