

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 June 2001

Sugar workers seize union office in Mexico

Three hundred union members at the San Cristobal Sugar Mill, Mexico's largest, took over the office of the sugar workers union for three days beginning June 12 in a bid to organize independently. They left June 15, after the Mexican Department of Labor promised to resolve the issue on June 20.

The sugar workers union is one of the bastions of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), a bureaucratic-corporatist structure that is largely under control of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI). The CTM union represents workers at 58 mills. Dissidents charge the union bureaucracy, headed by Ramos Rodriguez, a PRI congressman and president of the union since 1995, with stealing \$55 million from the union retirement fund and severely reducing pensions to the 11,000 retirees. They further charge the Rodriguez group with embezzling funds from another 10 union accounts, including money dedicated to housing subsidies and sports activities.

Airline workers demonstrate in Argentina

On June 14, Argentine Air Lines mechanics declared a truce after one week of demonstrations to save their jobs. In agreeing to the truce, union leaders knuckled under to company threats to close its operations.

According to assurances from Argentine President Fernando De la Rúa, the truce will last at least until the details of a deal between the government and the company are revealed. The airline is owned by SEPI, a Spanish holding company, which is looking for a new buyer.

Throughout the week, airline workers staged noisy demonstrations inside the terminals of Buenos Aires' international airport, Ezeiza, intent on disrupting passenger service by the Spanish airline company Iberia. Police set up roadblocks leading to the airport to prevent workers from reaching the airport.

Mexico City educators end protests

At the conclusion of 31 days of mobilizations in Mexico City by education workers represented by the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE), union leaders acknowledged that very few concrete gains were made. The Fox administration did not move from its position that the teachers' demands are not federal issues.

The protests by teachers from the impoverished southern Mexican states were largely ignored by the SNTE, the National Union of Education Workers, of which CNTE is a dissident part. Consequently, Mexico City's teachers did not join the protests.

Guatemalan unions reject tax increases

The General Confederation of Guatemalan Workers (CGTG) has called for a protest march and rally in Guatemala City on June 22 against increases in the national Value Added Tax (VAT). CGTG leader Jose Pinzon called the tax unconstitutional, unjust and unfair. He noted that an unemployed worker or a peasant pays the same tax rate as a millionaire.

In a nation in which 80 percent of the population lives in poverty, the new rates exceed the ability of many to pay. The CGTG gives the following figures for Guatemala: 2.8 million Guatemalans live on less than 7 Quetzales (less than US\$1) a day; six million (about 57 percent) live on less than 14 Quetzales.

Artists protest in Peru

Workers and students at the School of Art Formation (ESFAS) in

Trujillo, Peru, mobilized on June 16 against government cuts that would undermine cultural education in Peru. The demonstration consisted of a day of musical and dramatic performances in Central Trujillo, as well as a show of paintings and sculptures.

Hundreds came out to support the artists and view the displays. The protest included artists from other art institutes and conservatories in Peru. The artists announced that this would be the first of a series of mobilizations to alert the population to the needs of artists and to press the government to support cultural activities.

Teachers strike in Panama

Educators in the Darien region of Panama began a work stoppage on June 13 and vowed to stay out on strike until the Ministry of Education addresses their demands. The strike is in solidarity with 250 teachers that are owed four months pay; other teachers are owed back pay for lesser amounts. The teachers are also pressing for wage and benefit increases, more funding for building maintenance, better equipment in the schools and updated technologies.

On June 15 the teachers marched through the streets of the city of Meteti to publicize their situation. Out of the 700 Darien teachers, 250 must rely on their relatives and buy food on credit, said one teacher.

Unemployed workers form a union in Uruguay

A congress of the Union of the Unemployed (UTD) has called for a national strike on June 27. The UTD has also proposed a series of demonstrations to demand the right to a job. The National Union Federation (PIT-CNT) and the government have so far refused to recognize the UTD, citing the radicalism of its leaders.

In addition to the June 27 strike, the UTD is also organizing mobilizations for July 6, 9 and 14 in Montevideo and other Uruguayan cities. The official unemployment rate in Uruguay exceeds 15 percent, the highest rate in Uruguay's history. The unemployment rate for youth under 25 is twice as high at 32 percent.

National day of protest in Dominican Republic

The Coordination of Popular and Trade Union Organizations (CODEPS) is organizing a day of protest for June 19 across the country to protest against the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), which took power 10 months ago. In addition to opposing President Hopolito Mejia's economic policies, CODEPS also demands a reduction in electricity rates, which have gone up by 20 percent, and in the price of gasoline.

Tentative agreement in Comair strike

Negotiators representing Comair and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) reached a tentative agreement on a five-year contract June 14 that could bring the nearly three-month-old strike by 1,350 pilots against the nation's second largest regional carrier to a close. The strike is the longest to hit the airline industry since 1989.

No details of the agreement have been made available, but according to press reports the tentative proposal protects the cost advantages for Comair, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Delta Airlines, which pays pilots substantially less than pilots at the major airlines. Comair, which also flies under the name Delta Connection, has spearheaded the use of lower-cost and highly profitable regional jets that fly from smaller cities to major hubs. The strike was watched very closely by other airlines, which are also seeking to expand the use of regional jets.

Before the strike, Comair pilots averaged about \$45,000 a year with first-year copilots receiving \$16,000 and veteran pilots with 12 years experience earning \$69,000. The average pay for Delta pilots, who fly the industry's largest aircraft, is \$150,000. Comair pilots complained that their responsibilities rivaled those of their counterparts at the major airlines and went on strike to substantially increase their pay.

The Comair strike shut down the operation of the airline's 80 regional jets that carry 250,000 passengers daily to 95 cities in the US, Mexico, Canada and the Bahamas. Some 2,400 of 4,000 employees were laid off and 400 pilot positions were eliminated. The tentative agreement is supposed to restore the jobs of all the pilots. Striking pilots are expected to complete voting on the pact by June 25.

Bush to bar flight attendants strike at American Airlines

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta announced June 13 that President George Bush will not permit a strike at American Airlines should the current 30-day cooling-off period expire without a contract agreement between the airlines and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA).

The APFA rejected an offer for binding arbitration reached under federal mediators earlier this month. This started the clock ticking towards a possible strike by 23,000 flight attendants at American Airlines right before the July 4 holiday. Mineta's announcement makes it virtually certain that Bush will appoint a Presidential Emergency Board to enter into the negotiations, thus delaying a strike for another 60 days.

Should this happen, it would guarantee American would not suffer a strike during the busy summer travel season and allow the company to deal with a strike after Labor Day. American has said that if the flight attendants strike, it will shut down all its operations.

The union and the company are scheduled to resume negotiations in a few days. Neither side has publicly discussed the issues preventing a settlement. The major reported sticking point is the manner in which a profit-sharing formula is to be framed.

Contract talks to resume between United Airlines and mechanics union

Negotiations between United Airlines and the union representing customer service agents and ramp workers were to resume June 18 with both sides hinting that an agreement was possible after progress in the last round of negotiations. Federal mediators, who have been participating in the talks, also indicated that the two sides were closer to an agreement in the nearly year-old talks.

Some 15,000 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) are seeking an industry-leading contract in terms of compensation. The IAM did not repeat an earlier request to be released from federally mediated negotiations to clear the way for a strike after a 30-day cooling-off period. Meanwhile, another 15,000 United mechanics, who are also members of the IAM, are scheduled to resume talks on June 20. The mechanics requested a release from federally mediated talks. Their talks resumed two weeks ago after being put on hold since December 2000.

Ailing LTV steel company takes legal action to void union contract

LTV, the Cleveland-based steel company, called on a federal court June 11 to overturn its existing labor contract with the United Steelworkers (USW). The move is aimed at increasing pressure on the USW bureaucracy to collaborate further in the company's restructuring plan.

USW President Leo Gerard protested that LTV ignored the union's last proposal to arrange a loan financed by a fund extracted from workers' hourly pay. The proposal was aimed to head off LTV's plans to shut down the west-end mill at its Cleveland Works. LTV filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy last December and is presently losing close to \$1 million a day. Through the motion to overturn the contract with the USW, LTV seeks to impose its own plan for health benefits while continuing to negotiate other terms with the union.

Titan Tire fosters ethnic divisions to split strikers

Titan Tire Corporation has deliberately sought to whip up ethnic divisions at its Des Moines, Iowa plant where a strike by some 650 members of the United Steelworkers has dragged on since 1998. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* highlighted the divide and conquer strategy used by Titan's owner Maurice Taylor, which the *Journal* describes as an "antiunion entrepreneur who financed his own quirky presidential bid in 1996."

Taylor acquired the Iowa plant in 1994 from an Italian company. In preparation for a union-busting campaign that culminated in the 1998 strike, he expanded the hiring of immigrants, especially Southeast Asians, to the point where they comprised 25 percent of the workforce. Taylor assumed that when a strike was finally provoked, the immigrant workers would cross the picket lines and help break the strike. Instead, the immigrant workers, many whom resided in the US for a decade or more, refused to cross the picket lines.

More recently Taylor has turned to recruiting newer arrivals to the US, such as Bosnian workers fleeing the civil war in the Balkans. In one example, cited by the *Journal*, a Bosnian worker was lured from an auto parts factory where he made just \$6.70 with the promise of a supervisory position at Titan, paying \$14 an hour.

Union urges Vancouver transit workers to end strike

Union officials are urging Vancouver transit workers to end a protracted strike, although the two major issues in dispute—Coast Mountain Bus Company's demands it be allowed to contract out work and hire part-time drivers—remain unresolved.

Last week a British Columbia government-appointed mediator proposed a three-year contract under which management's demands for greater "flexibility" would be made the object of further study and negotiations. If after a year the union and management remained unable to resolve their differences, the mediator proposed that he be empowered to make a binding ruling.

"It's far from perfect," declared Canadian Auto Workers area director Len Ruel. "But we are telling our members that continuing their strike would gain them what?"

The 3,400 drivers and mechanics, who are now in their twelfth week of strike action, are being asked by the CAW to endorse the mediator's proposal in a vote June 19. Earlier, the union made proposals to save the transit authority \$6 million over three years. These included reducing overtime and a lower wage rate for new hires.

Management has rejected the mediator's report, saying it cannot compromise on its demand for cost-savings. "I know this will be unpopular," declared Coast Mountain President Dave Stumpo. "But ... we need fundamental change now."

Stumpo is looking to the newly-elected and openly anti-union provincial Liberal government to legislate an end to the strike and impose a contract granting management demands.

Saskatchewan health care workers end strike

Twelve thousand Saskatchewan health care workers returned to work June 15, ending a six-day strike. The Canadian Union of Public Employees claimed it had wrested important concessions from the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) in a proposed three-year contract. But after years of declining real wages, the workers are to receive pay increases of just 3 percent a year, less than the current inflation rate. Although SAHO is legally autonomous, financially it is completely dependent on Saskatchewan's New Democratic Party-led government.



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