

Workers Struggles: the Americas

14 August 2001

Workers and unemployed protest in Argentina

Jobless workers and public employees carried out two days of protests, joining a one-day national strike by Argentine teachers and other public employees on August 8. Demonstrators demanded the De la Rúa government rescind the austerity measures it has agreed to in exchange for an IMF bailout of the crisis-ridden economy. Protesters blocked major highways across the nation and there were marches and rallies at Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo and Congress Square.

The National Confederation of Education Workers (CTERA) called the August 8 strike to protest delays in pay and attacks on teachers' rights. Teachers in the San Juan, La Rioja, Tucuman and Formosa provinces are continuing an indefinite strike.

Thousands of teachers walk out in Honduras

On August 6, 40,000 public school teachers in Honduras walked out on an indefinite strike in 10 of the nation's largest cities. With a monthly wage of \$150, the teachers are demanding a 33 percent increase in their hourly pay, plus the payment of back wages.

Arnaldo Pinto, president of the Federation of Teachers Organizations (FOM), declared that the strike could "intensify if the government does not agree to our wage demands." The teachers are planning a national mobilization to block major highways on August 14.

Education Minister Ramon Caliz denounced the teachers for striking too much, saying they had walked out 20 times during the last five years. He called on teachers to go back to work until a new government takes power in January 2002 and urged parents to mobilize against the teachers.

Judge bars strike by San Francisco Bay area transit workers

A California state judge issued a court order barring 230 train controllers and other technical and supervisory employees of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system from striking for two weeks. Democratic Governor Grey Davis called for a 60-day cooling-off period, but the judge limited the order because officials of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) were not present at the hearing.

The union's main dispute with BART is that transit management is hiring consultants and temporary workers to work union jobs.

Davis has already obtained cooling-off periods to prevent

strikes by 800 station agents and train operators represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union and another 1,700 maintenance, clerical and professional workers represented by the Service Employees International Union. The present status of negotiations is not known. In July the union was pressing for a 26.5 percent wage increase. The cooling-off periods will expire at the end of August.

Tentative contract for Washington, DC city workers

Democratic Washington DC Mayor Anthony Williams and municipal union officials appeared at a joint press conference to announce a tentative agreement for the city's 13,500 workers. Wage increases for workers in the eight separate unions were not detailed, but reportedly totaled \$61.3 million. The agreement also called for a \$500 bonus.

It is not clear whether DC workers have closed the wage and benefit gap with municipal workers in the surrounding metropolitan region. Union and city officials agreed to form a joint committee that will consolidate the 200 pay schedules for city workers along with job classifications and wage systems. Williams has been campaigning to implement a "pay for performance" system to govern compensation for city workers.

Tentative agreement with pilots at Air Wisconsin

Air Wisconsin and the union representing 700 pilots reached a tentative settlement in the early hours of August 12 after both sides extended the strike deadline. Details of the agreement are to remain confidential pending a ratification vote by members of the Air Line Pilots Association.

The last round of mediated talks was aimed at resolving wages, retirement and job security issues. Starting pilots called first officers make only \$20,000 a year while captains make about \$37,000 in their first year.

Air Wisconsin serves as a regional carrier for United Airlines under the name United Express and flies to 21 states and 44 cities.

As in the recent strike by Comair pilots, who also fly the smaller regional jets, the negotiations at Air Wisconsin were aimed at curtailing pilot wage demands and ensuring the profitability of this sector of the airline industry. Air Wisconsin is planning to expand and has 75 new regional jets on order. The company has recently faced flight cancellations, which it blames on mechanics and customer service agents who do not have a labor agreement.

Alaska Air agrees to tentative deal with pilots

Alaska Airlines, the nation's ninth largest carrier, and the

union representing the company's 1,453 pilots arrived at a tentative deal August 8. The Seattle-based airline agreed to a four-year contract with immediate across-the-board pay raises of 11.05 percent, followed by 5 percent in 2002 and 4 percent in 2003.

Talks resume at Titan Tire

Negotiations in the three-year-old strike by Titan Tire workers at the company's Des Moines, Iowa plant resumed August 8 as company and union officials attempt to resolve how many of the 670 striking members of the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 164 will get their jobs back.

Titan and the USW have already negotiated a five-year economic package. But during the course of the 39-month strike the company hired 500 replacement workers. Titan officials are attempting to recall workers in small numbers over an extended period. The company must also resolve a number of unfair labor practice violations that were passed down by the National Labor Relations Board.

Union drives gain ground at Delta

The Association of Flight Attendants announced they would petition the National Mediation Board in early September for a certification election to represent 20,000 flight attendants at Delta Air Lines. Meanwhile, the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) has said it passed the mandatory 35 percent support for a union election but wants to wait until it has 50 percent of Delta's 10,000 mechanics signed up. AMFA recently achieved an industry-leading contract for mechanics at Northwest Airlines after workers decertified the International Association of Machinists, and joined AMFA. Last year ground workers rejected a unionization drive by the Transport Workers Union in their first union election at Delta in three decades.

Continental flight instructors get tentative agreement

Flight instructors at Continental Airlines have gotten their first labor agreement with the Houston-based carrier. Details of the proposal will not be released until the executive council of the Air Line Pilots Association meets August 13-17 to approve the proposal and submit it to rank-and-file ratification.

Tentative agreement in New Brunswick nursing home workers strike

Nine hours after 2,600 workers struck 35 nursing homes in New Brunswick, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) signed a tentative agreement to end the walkout. Voting on the deal, whose terms have not been revealed, was expected to begin Monday evening.

The workers struck Sunday morning to demand improved wages and increased staffing. Nursing home workers have onerous workloads, with staffing levels reported to be 40 percent lower than what is needed. The Tory provincial government, headed by Bernard Lord, threatened to intervene to halt any strike action after talks broke down earlier.

The government, which funds nursing homes in the province, offered wage increases of 12.3 percent over four years, while the union said it was seeking a 10 percent hike in a three-year

contract.

In an effort to forestall threatened back-to-work legislation, the union appealed for an early meeting with Community Services Minister Percy Mockler, who called the strike "unnecessary." But even some nursing home employers have admitted that staffing levels have been far too low for years and appeals to the government for increased funding have been futile. The current health care dispute is the latest in an ongoing battle against the drive for privatization in New Brunswick, which has provoked strikes by other health care workers, including doctors earlier this year.

Toronto hotel locks out workers

One hundred and fourteen were locked out at the Sheraton Four Points Airport hotel on August 3, as negotiations for a second contract with management broke down. The Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union (HERE) said the company's final offer sharply limited benefits, denied increases for low wage workers and allowed contracting out of work. The union says it is seeking increases comparable to those won by workers at other hotels in the Toronto area.

Management at the Sheraton Four Points did not inform customers of their intention to lock workers out and, while there have not yet been reports of scab replacements, union work is now being done by management. HERE officials say they may call a job action by workers at four other Toronto area hotels to back the locked-out workers. A total of 1,500 workers are employed at some of the most prestigious accommodations in the city, hotels owned by Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, a subsidiary of Canadian Pacific (CP).

The decision to lock out the Sheraton workers follows a move by CP to spin off some of its interests, including Fairmont, into separately traded companies. Net income to CP shareholders climbed 66 percent in the first six months of this year to a total of \$1.1 billion.



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