

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 September 2001

Public workers strike in Argentina

On September 7, Argentine government workers launched a 24-hour national strike against ongoing wage cuts. The strikers marched with the unemployed and rallied in downtown Buenos Aires. Unemployed *piqueteros* blocked highways on Thursday and Friday as part of a two-day protest.

Workers and the jobless denounced the government's "zero deficit" policy, designed to continue servicing the international debt at the expense of workers' living standards. In August government accounts showed a slight surplus, with tax receipts greater than expenditures. However, the wage cuts are to continue at least through September, according to government sources. In addition to federal employees unions and unemployed workers, provincial workers in the capital, health workers and teachers also mobilized for the protest.

Honduran education workers battle police

On September 7, Honduran National Police, using tear gas and water cannon, evicted thousands of protesting education workers from three bridges that lead into Tegucigalpa, the capital city. Teachers occupied bridges to protest the government's education policies.

On strike for two months, 50,000 teachers are demanding the government rescind laws that affect their economic interests. The streets of Tegucigalpa are currently a daily scene of protests and rallies by workers demanding housing, jobs and social services.

Rural teaching students strike in Mexico

Students at the Tlaxcala teachers college are striking against cuts in education. The striking students questioned the government's intransigence at a press conference attended by supporters from 16 Mexican states. "This is a movement that defends these centers of learning," declared striker Victoria Martinez Ramirez.

On September 5, 6 and 7 the rural teaching students and their supporters blocked highways entering the capital of Tlaxcala state. They also removed the political advertising of various political parties competing in the November 11 elections and pasted signs on local buses in support of their struggle. The students have rejected a government offer of 80 scholarships.

United Airlines and union call for impasse in mechanics negotiations

Both United Airlines and the International Association of Machinists have asked the National Mediation Board (NMB) to release them from mediated contract talks under the premise that it will force a settlement in the 21-month labor negotiations. If the NMB agrees that the sides are too far apart, a 30-day cooling-off period would be imposed before a potential strike could be called.

United claims it has an industry-leading contract for its 20,000 mechanics on the bargaining table. But in the same breath it has

declared that any settlement must take into account the airline industry slump and the fact the United has lost nearly \$1 billion in the past year.

The machinists union is also negotiating a contract for 30,000 United ground workers and customer service employees.

Piedmont flight attendants picket to demand contract settlement

Flight attendants at Piedmont Airlines picketed the Norfolk International Airport in Virginia, warning that if the air carrier does not reach an agreement by September 16 with the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) it would selectively target flights for slowdowns and sick-outs without warning. Presently, the National Mediation Board, which declared an impasse August 15, is enforcing a 30-day cooling-off period.

The 250 AFA members are angry that they remain grossly underpaid in comparison to flight attendants at Piedmont's parent airline, US Airways, and other airlines. A flight attendant at Piedmont makes \$27.57 per flight hour while those at other airlines average \$40. Flight hours only measure time between closing and opening the hatches. Flight attendants are not compensated for other hours spent at airports.

Failure to conclude teachers contract causing crisis in Hawaiian schools

The ongoing contract struggle between Hawaii teachers and the governor is causing teachers to leave the trade, giving concern to some government officials. Governor Ben Cayetano is opposing bonuses sought by the teachers union, preventing a final contract settlement.

According to the state superintendent of schools, the rate of teacher retirement and resignation has nearly doubled. In addition, Hawaiian public schools are under a court order that 85 percent of special education teachers be licensed by November 1. The loss of teachers will make it difficult for the schools to honor the court decree.

A federal judge is presently considering intervening in the labor dispute to force implementation of those parts of the contract that are already agreed upon. Governor Cayetano and the unions have not been able to agree on bonuses for teachers with advanced degrees.

Tucson transit workers strike

More than 400 Tucson, Arizona bus drivers, mechanics and other transportation workers struck the city's transit system September 5, largely curtailing services for 30,000 riders. The strikers, members of the Teamsters union, are demanding a 50 cent an hour wage increase in the first year of a three-year agreement, while officials of Sun Tran, Tucson's public transportation authority, are only offering 8 cents.

Sun Tran drivers earn wages of between \$10.07 and \$14.19 an hour. On August 26, workers rejected Sun Tran's last offer for raises of 8 cents, 54 cents and 52 cents in each year of the proposed contract. The Teamsters claim they stepped in and offered a union health plan that took the dispute over health care premiums off the table and saved the city \$1.43 million. The city was then supposed to redistribute the money into a higher wage offer for the first year of the agreement. Instead, the city stuck to its offer and is attempting to recruit replacement workers along with management personnel to maintain the transit system.

Tentative agreement at Titan Tire

United Steelworkers (USW) Local 164 announced it has reached a tentative agreement with Titan Tire, potentially bringing the three-year strike at the company's Des Moines plant to a close. Details of the pact were not revealed, except that the USW and Titan claimed that the agreement will permit all strikers to return to their jobs.

The 670 steelworkers will decide whether to ratify the agreement on September 18. Titan International, the parent company of Titan Tire Corporation, is a transnational company supplying tires for equipment in the agriculture, construction, mining, recreation and military sectors. The Des Moines plant was the company's largest operation.

Pilot opposition to Horizon contract

Opposition to the tentative contract between Seattle-based Horizon Air and the Air Line Pilots Association has emerged as pilots await the announcement of a ratification vote by the airline's 700 pilots.

Horizon pilots, like their counterparts at other airlines, have won considerable pay increases. But the contract now being voted on contains a provision to calculate flight pay based on the airline's flight schedule and not on the actual time the flight requires. Estimated times listed in schedules are determined by management.

Pilots opposed to the language charge the contract language amounts to at least a 10 percent cut in pay. During the period from April to June, 23.9 percent of Horizon's flights arrived more than 15 minutes behind schedule. Previously, flight pay was calculated from the moment that blocks are removed from a jet's wheels right before takeoff to the point where wheels are chocked after landing at its destination. One pilot pointed out that schedule time from Seattle to Portland is listed on the schedule at 50 minutes but due to congestion could take up to one-and-a-half hours.

Lockout of metal workers at New York plant

Workers at Wah Chang metal products plant in Albany, New York were locked out of their jobs September 4, just as a midnight strike deadline approached. The workers, members of the United Steelworkers union, charge the company's proposal for retirement benefits and wages is not in line with compensation received by Wah Chang workers at the global company's other operations.

Wah Chang workers picketed the plant to protest the lockout. They claim they are exposed to a higher rate of cancer for working with the company's metal products, which include zirconium, titanium and others. The contract with the Steelworkers union expired in January of this year.

Tentative deal averts Bay Area transit strike

Politicians, union officials and negotiators for San Francisco and Oakland's transit system reached a tentative agreement September 4 that averts a strike by 2,500 workers for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system. No details were made available, except that San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown and Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown intervened in discussions that were stymied by a 2.25 percent difference on wages.

The Amalgamated Transit Union and the Service Employees International Union had been asking for raises of 20.5 percent over three years while BART had offered 18.5 percent over four years. The unions justified their wage requests based on the skyrocketing cost of living in the Bay Area. A strike would have caused considerable transportation problems for some 300,000 users of the BART system. In 1997 workers struck BART for six days.

Meanwhile, a superior court judge barred a third union from striking until mid-October. Some 270 supervisors and managers are under a 42-day cooling-off period in their negotiations over a contract with BART.

Federal workers continue protests

With the completion of their three-week "workless Wednesday" campaign in August, federal workers and civil servants have been engaged in a further series of strikes, walkouts and protests across the country. They are angered at the slow pace of contract negotiations, which have dragged on for a year. There are now over 50,000 workers in a legal strike position.

The workers are organized under the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which represents 77,000 workers across the country in a wide range of government departments where the Treasury Board is the employer. They include secretarial staff, firefighters, hospital workers, ships crews and numerous other workers. They are fighting for an annual increase of 5 percent in each year of a three-year contract, but the government's latest offer is something near half of that. A conciliator's report has already recommended wage increases of 9 percent for the new contract and a \$1,000 signing bonus, but the government has remained firm on its last offer.

Actions staged over the last week included the blockade of a revenue Canada building in Nova Scotia in which one worker was arrested after dozens of police officers were brought in. A number of workers in Ontario and Quebec walked off the job last Thursday to support wage negotiations with the Treasury Board and passport officers stopped issuing passports during their lunch hour. Demonstrations and pickets were held at a number of urban centers across Ontario and on Thursday over 4,000 workers stayed off the job.



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