

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 December 2001

Forty thousand teachers strike in southern Mexico

On December 3, over 40,000 education workers began an indefinite strike in the state of Chiapas. They are demanding that Mexican President Fox raise the education budget by 12 percent. The teachers demonstrated through the streets of Tuxtla Gutierrez, also demanding a wage increase and greater funds to repair school buildings.

Oil workers mobilize against Colombian death squads

Five thousand oil workers employed by the Colombian oil company ECOPEPETROL are continuing a strike to protest the assassination of union leader Aury Sara Marrugo. "This is a strike of indefinite duration because we are victims of state-sponsored terrorism," declared Pedro Julian Cote, national secretary of the National Workers Union (USO) that represents the workers. On December 2 the Colombian Army occupied the Cartagena Refinery after management reported the union workers had shut it down. The army also controls the Barrancabermeja complex, a highly automated plant that continues to function with white-collar workers.

On December 1, union leader Sara was kidnapped in Cartagena by a paramilitary death squad. The fascist United Colombian Self Defense Force (AUC) accused him of being a member of the National Liberation Army (ELN), one of the guerrilla groups fighting the state. His body was found December 4, together with that of his bodyguard. Colombian President Andres Pastrana rejected the charge that the government was involved in Sara's execution and cancelled a meeting with the union leadership in protest. At the same time Pastrana made a pro forma request that the Colombian armed forces break all ties with the AUC.

Transbrasil Airline workers demand back pay

On December 4 and 5 striking workers at Transbrasil Airlines protested in Sao Paulo to demand the payment of back wages, as the company suspended operations due to lack of funds to pay for fuel. "We were taken by surprise, though we expected a measure like that since last week," said Pedro Azambuja, president of the Airline Workers Federation (FAA). Without warning Transbrasil grounded its flights on December 3, leaving crews stranded in faraway cities. Following a strike by the workers the company agreed to begin repaying some of the back wages.

Once one of Brazil's four biggest domestic airlines, Transbrasil controlled 20 percent of the domestic market in 1999. This year its share fell from 10 percent to 5 percent. According to Varig President Ozires Silva, Transbrasil's troubles are symptoms of a deeper disease affecting the entire air travel industry. At the time of the mobilization, 2,000 workers were owed up to three months' pay.

Mexican truck drivers block US-Mexico border

On December 6 and 7 hundreds of Mexican truck drivers blocked the two international bridges that join Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas to protest regulations that prevent them from entering the United States. Manuel Sotelo, president of the Ciudad Juarez Transport Association, declared that a defective computer system prevents US inspectors from receiving up-to-date information from the Mexican Department of Transportation. Every day between 30 and 40 trucks are turned back. He pointed out that 1,200 trucks have been turned back since November 1. The truck drivers are planning daily job actions for the next few weeks. More than 3,000 Mexican trucks cross into El Paso every day.

Public workers occupy health department in Chile

On December 5, members of the Federation of Health Workers (FENATS) took over the offices of the Health Service in Valdivia, Chile to pressure the Lagos government for a wage increase. FENATS is demanding an across-the-board increase of 14,000 pesos (about US\$200) for the 44,000 health workers it represents. The government has offered only \$70.

Slavery in Brazil

The use of slavery in Brazilian lumber camps is on the rise, according to Pastor Ricardo Rezende Figueira, a Protestant minister in Northern Brazil. Rezende explained last week that so far this year a special mobile unit of the Labor Department has gained liberty for 1,110 slaves, almost double the 553 who were freed last year. "It concerns us that the increase took place even though the mobile unit performance has deteriorated," said the minister. Since it was formed in 1995, the mobile unit has freed 3,000 slaves.

A common practice is to lure workers from the impoverished north to lumber camps. There they find themselves at the mercy of their employers' claims that they are liable for astronomically high debts, which they will never be able to pay. This form of slavery, known as debt peonage, is illegal in most countries, including Brazil.

Striking New Jersey teachers return to work after mass arrests

On Friday, December 7, the Middletown Township Education Association (MTEA) called off the weeklong strike by 1,000 teachers in New Jersey after a week of mass arrests ordered by a strikebreaking judge. Over 200 teachers and other school employees were thrown in jail for defying a back-to-work order issued by Judge Clarkson Fisher, Jr. only three hours after the teachers walked out. Teachers, who were fighting against board of education plans to impose higher out-of-pocket health care expenses, faced a vicious attack, not only by the judge, but school officials, local politicians and the media.

After months of working without a contract the teachers were scheduled to strike September 11, but postponed their action after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Another two-and-a-half months of stalemated negotiations ensued before the teachers walked out November 29. The school board, with the help of the news media, tried to whip up public opinion against the teachers, denouncing them for daring to go on strike when townspeople were mourning the loss of community members at the World Trade Center. At one point, school superintendent Jack DeTalvo said that the school district was at "war" while other officials likened the teachers to the Taliban.

Despite the efforts to intimidate the teachers they stood their ground. As teachers were hauled before Judge Fisher they denounced the school authorities for tyranny and deception and said they were willing to go to jail to defend their rights. Fellow teachers and their supporters shouted messages of solidarity as defiant teachers were led away in handcuffs to awaiting paddy wagons. Unable to break the will of the teachers in first few days, Judge Fisher increased the length of the sentences to 13 days from the initial 7 and threatened to order the strikers fired at further hearings the next week if the strike continued.

In the face of these attacks the National Education Association (NEA), whose president Bob Chase had pledged the support of his 2.6 million members just days before the strike was called off, did nothing to mobilize

teachers and school employees behind the Middletown strikers. Rather than wage a struggle against the political forces arrayed against the teachers—which would have evoked powerful support, including from the 80,000 New York City teachers just 50 miles away, who have been working for two years without a contract—the NEA leaders undoubtedly pressured the local union to throw in the towel and send their members back to work without a contract.

Talks break off in Pratt & Whitney strike

Negotiators for Pratt & Whitney and the union for 5,000 striking workers at the company's four jet-engine plants in Connecticut broke off talks December 8 after two hours to review their bargaining positions. Officials from the machinists' union and management have made public statements indicating a desire to end the weeklong strike. A company spokesman, however, has made it clear the corporation has no intention of increasing the total monetary value of the proposed contract, which rank-and-file workers overwhelmingly rejected a week ago. The company is currently using 2,000 of its plant supervisors, engineers and other workers to take the place of the 5,100 striking workers.

Pratt & Whitney, a major contractor for the US Pentagon, has offered a 10 percent wage increase over three years, plus a \$1,000 signing bonus for each worker. The company has also offered a 10 percent increase in pensions and health insurance benefits. The major concern of the striking workers is job security. The company wants to remove about 500 engine parts repair work jobs out of Connecticut and send them to locations where the work can be done more cheaply. Management has told the union it intends only to move labor-intensive jobs out of the state, while bringing in military engine jobs requiring higher skills.

The workers are distrustful of the company's promises for good reason. Job loss has been a major issue for some time. Pratt & Whitney employs about 13,000 workers in Connecticut, 7,000 less than in the 1990s. The company is a subsidiary of United Technologies Corp., which supplies engines and spare parts to commercial airlines and the military. United Technologies has announced plans to lay off 5,000 workers as a result of the slowdown in the airline industry after the September 11 attacks. Half the cuts would come from Pratt & Whitney, which has 30,000 employees worldwide.

In addition to job security, workers are also seeking retirement security. Union spokesmen have explained that the current plans force retirees to fall into poverty over time.

Talks break off in Missouri school bus strike

Talks between Teamsters officials representing 350 striking school bus drivers and the transportation company contracted by the Missouri school districts of Fort Zumwalt and Francis Howell, near St. Louis, broke off after 11 hours without an agreement. First Student and Teamsters Local 610 were reported to have agreed on wages, but this does not necessarily mean an agreement is near. What sparked the strike was the 11-year progression required before starting hires, paid \$9 an hour, could reach maximum pay of \$13.10 an hour. The two districts have been able to fill only a handful of the strikers' positions in the two-month walkout. The overwhelming majority of the 26,000 students must find other ways to get to school.

Flight attendants union charges members abused by security guards

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) revealed that it has waited for more than a month without an answer to a letter to the US transportation secretary charging "abusive behavior" by airport security towards female flight attendants who were "fondled and groped by male security guards" at airports.

The Transportation Department finally responded when the letter became public by saying, "We have not responded to [AFA president Patricia] Friend yet; a response is being prepared."

The letter points to three specific cases. In Portland, Oregon, guards pressed their hands on the stomach of a pregnant flight attendant. When

she protested they threatened to strip-search her. In San Francisco another flight attendant was repeatedly rubbed all over her body with a screening wand by a male security guard. When she tried to pull back the guard became irate and started screaming at her. In Los Angeles, a flight attendant questioned a security guard's order about putting a food container through an X-ray machine, pointing out it was open. She was denounced as a "security risk" and surrounded by armed National Guard troops who "demanded she strip down."

The incidents are not isolated. Female airline travelers also report being subjected to groping, having metal detectors thrust inside their clothes, dresses lifted up and ultimately being threatened with strip searches if they protest or ask for female guard.

Workers locked out at CBC

Technicians at Canadian Public Broadcasting, the giant public broadcaster, were off the job as of December 8 after talks to avoid a strike failed and newly hired security guards escorted workers out of CBC buildings in a number of cities including Toronto. Despite these actions, CBC executives have insisted that this is not a lockout but a strike.

The 1,600 affected technicians are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP). They include sound, video and production technicians, design staff, and electronic maintenance workers employed primarily at English language facilities across the country. They have been without a contract since last June and have been in a legal strike position since November 28.

Last Friday, workers, frustrated with the slow pace of contract talks, held study sessions in five cities during work hours, a move which management said amounted to strike action. The union raised the possibility of strike action a week ago, but continued negotiations in hopes of reaching a settlement when the strike deadline was passed.

The main issues in the dispute are concessions demanded by the employer that would disallow breaks to eat or sleep between shifts. CBC is also attempting to replace full-time workers with part-time employees in some areas. The union is seeking improvements in wages, pensions and job security. The union held a strike vote three weeks ago after CBC essentially imposed a contract which provided pay increases of 3.5 percent over three years, well below the original 14 percent the union was demanding.



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