

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 July 2002

Chilean health workers strike

Members of the National Federation of Health Workers (FENPRUSS) voted to temporarily end their strike on July 4, pending a government response to their demands.

The FENPRUSS bureaucracy pushed through the vote to avoid a confrontation with the government of President Ricardo Lagos. The government had declared it would not negotiate as long as health workers were on strike. FENPRUSS President Juan Diaz declared that since the government had made two concessions on hiring and promotions the union would put an end to mobilizations that “don’t come up to our expectations.”

The government is proposing reforms to the public health system in Chile that would include paying workers by the hour instead of on a salaried basis, something that the workers reject. Health officials also propose a 4 percent raise.

FENPRUSS had carried out the job action with the National Confederation of Health Workers, (CONFENATS). CONFENATS members struck for 24 hours on July 3.

Strike threat by postal workers in Costa Rica

Costa Rican postal workers are threatening to strike unless the government of Abel Pacheco withdraws a demand that the postal service cut its budget by 40 percent—a demand being made of most other government departments. Guido Fallas, leader of the National Association of Public and Private Employees (ANEP), indicated that if the measure is applied, 200 workers will lose their jobs and 40-50 local post offices would close nationally.

He accused postal authorities of obeying the budget cut directive without thinking of the impact it would have on the post office and its social consequences. “The object of this struggle goes beyond the issue of workers’ rights” in protecting the post office from privatization, the postal workers union official said.

Starving banana plantation workers to shut down Pan American Highway

Workers at five plantations in the department of Chiriqui in western Panama have threatened to barricade the Pan American Highway linking Panama with Costa Rica, to protest their dire predicament. Out of 14 plantations in the area, 5 have shut down and the other 9 are operating at minimal levels and are expected to collapse soon.

A government commission sent to investigate reported conditions of extreme poverty, hunger and disease among the banana workers’ families reported high levels of rage among banana workers and warned that social conditions were explosive. The commission also indicated that all the conditions are present for epidemics of cholera and other infectious diseases, due both to the weakened state of the workers and to the lack of potable water.

Devaluation has made Venezuelans 67.25 percent poorer

A report from the firm Data Analysis states that until now, only the tip of the inflation iceberg has appeared since the Venezuelan currency was devalued last December. Living standards, however, have plummeted for the middle and working classes.

The average family monthly income is barely US\$401, a figure that masks the extent of social polarization. Forty-two percent of the population lives in semi-starvation, on \$131 a month. The next 38 percent average about \$266. The so-called middle class (17 percent of population) survives on about \$760.

The top 3 percent of the population, with an average income of around \$4,000, has also lost purchasing power, in large part due to its heavy dependence on imported goods.

The survey insists that these figures are just a signal of things to come. It predicts that once the effects of the devaluation fully work themselves through the economy, the full impact will be devastating to Venezuelans.

Casino workers strike six Las Vegas gambling houses

Hundreds of workers struck six downtown Las Vegas hotel-casinos last week while five establishments came to agreement with the Culinary Workers Union. Another casino, the Western Hotel & Bingo Parlor, announced it would close its operations due to poor financial performance.

The tentative contract covering workers at the Main Street Station, Fitzgeralds, Fremont, Four Queens and Jerry’s Nugget was ratified by an 808-3 vote, despite the fact it was 30 percent less expensive than contracts settled a month earlier for the 23 casinos located on Las Vegas’s strip that comprise the bulk of the union’s 50,000 members.

The lopsided ratification vote appears to have been boycotted by a considerable number of union members, although exact numbers are not available. The negotiations covering the downtown gambling houses were carried out in an atmosphere punctuated by talk of hard times for the casino owners in the wake of the September 11 events.

The closing of the Western Hotel would leave about 90 union workers and another 165 nonunion workers without jobs. However, Western’s management has asked the union for additional talks over its financial situation.

The Las Vegas contract struggle largely revolved around reaching a settlement that would stabilize the union-controlled health care fund. In the contract covering strip workers, only \$1.24 out of the total hourly package of \$3.24 over the course of a five-year agreement will go toward wages. The remainder will be used to prop up the health care fund. For downtown workers, the total package of wages and benefits came to \$2.20 an hour. But up to \$2.00 of that amount could go to the health care fund. The downtown contract, unlike the strip contract, gives the union

bureaucracy the flexibility to adjust how much of the negotiated amount goes to wages and health care.

Port management and dock workers union continue negotiations

The Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), representing shipping companies and the management at 29 West Coast ports, and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) continued to bargain past the July 1 contract expiration date as both sides agreed to renew the old contract on a day-to-day basis.

The exact status of talks is unknown. The PMA has made clear it wants to cut benefits while introducing new technology, something the union fears will further reduce the jobs of the 10,500-member union. While the technology will reduce jobs, management is claiming it will not lay off workers, but retrain them. Some of the technological issues involve bringing new cargo equipment into the harbors. Others concern connecting computers and avoiding the need of having port clerks reenter cargo data, an issue that has been at the center of redesigning business processes to reduce labor costs for all corporations.

The PMA has said that if it detects a slowdown it will lock out the ILWU. The ILWU leadership has made clear it will not call a strike or slowdown. However, it said that workers had a right to refuse overtime.

Both management and the labor bureaucracy are aware of the potential costs of a strike. One study put the cost of a 20-day port strike at \$48.6 billion. The PMA has lobbied both Congress and the White House to raise the issue of national defense to avert a strike or a slowdown by the ILWU. It is rumored that both Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other members of the Bush administration have called the union to exert pressure. Companies who have a stake in the import and export of commodities at the West Coast ports have asked President George W. Bush to call an 80-day cooling-off period in the event of a strike.

Teamsters International imposes trusteeship on Northwest flight attendants to block new union

Teamsters President James Hoffa imposed a trusteeship on Local 2000, which represents 11,000 flight attendants at Northwest Airlines, for not taking “decisive action” to block an organizing effort by a rival group within the union. Hoffa removed Local 2000 President Danny Campbell and the entire executive board for failing to implement his directives to fight a group calling themselves the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA).

In a letter to the local, Hoffa declared, “The refusal of the Local 2000 Executive Board to oppose the raid and to act to protect our bargaining rights is inexplicable. Its failure to act in the face of this clear and present danger, choosing instead to dicker over tactics, endangers the representation of the Northwest Airlines flight attendants.”

When the PFAA announced its campaign last month, declaring reform of the Teamsters was impossible, Hoffa called on the local to institute internal union charges against the five leaders of the new union, obtain IBT approval before making statements to the public, instruct Teamsters base representatives to oppose the campaign, and charge and remove any union official who declines to oppose PFAA.

In financial terms, the separation of the Northwest Bargaining unit could translate into the monthly loss of \$400,000 for the Teamsters union.

Local 2000 responded to Hoffa, saying, “We firmly believe that filing charges against our fellow flight attendants is not a constructive response to the challenge, and would likely do more to promote the rival union.” Local 2000 Vice President Anne Meyer called Hoffa’s response “oppressive,” and added, “They love a fear campaign, and that’s what they’re doing.”

Campbell and other flight attendants conflicted sharply with the previous leadership of Local 2000—a leadership that many workers saw as bowing to a pro-company policy of the Hoffa regime—during the last contract talks with Northwest. When a tentative contract was brought to the membership it was soundly defeated. When workers perceived that the leadership continued to drag its feet, a slowdown was launched. Northwest retaliated by firing several flight attendants and the government arrested opponents of the contract while seizing the hard drives of dissident leaders who maintained web sites opposing the contract.

Appeals court orders trucking company to accept Teamsters representation

The US Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Virginia ordered Overnite Transportation Company to begin collective bargaining with the Teamsters union at selected sites where the union had won a majority of workers through a certification election.

In 1995, workers at Overnite terminals in Detroit, Buffalo, Lexington and Bowling Green, Kentucky voted to join the Teamsters. Overnite rejected the results, insisting the Teamsters had threatened workers and fraudulent ballots had been cast. The court rejected those claims and called on Overnite to abide by the decision.

In reality, Overnite engaged in retaliatory action against pro-union workers. One Overnite operations manager testified to the NLRB that he fired more than 40 workers for supporting the Teamsters organizing drive.

The company has not yet said how it will respond to the decision. For five years, the Clinton administration, courts and the NLRB failed to press ahead on the Overnite case, despite knowing the facts. Only in the recent period, in which the Hoffa leadership has established the closest relationship with the Bush administration, has the case finally been acted upon.



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