

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 August 2002

## Government and Peruvian rice farmers end violent clash

Thousands of angry rice farmers brought their nine-day clash with police to an end after the government of Alejandro Toledo dispatched a delegation to negotiate over their demands. After 12 hours of negotiations the government agreed to purchase surplus rice from the farmers and promote its export.

The farmers will also send a delegation to the capital city of Lima to discuss debt owed by them to the private bank Asbanc. The Toledo government also says it will consider a reduction of a newly implemented sales tax. All three of these issues played an important role in provoking the upheaval.

The farmers launched their protest by barricading major roads into Tarapoto. On the seventh day of the strike, police and protesters clashed. On two occasions major battles erupted as protesters sought to take over the Tarapoto airport as police used helicopters to fire teargas at farmers. More than 100 have been injured and 57 arrested.

Like in the recent uprising in Arequipa, Tarapoto's mayor and other civic groups have given verbal support to the rice farmers. The clash in Arequipa was provoked by the central government's attempt to privatize two state-owned electricity companies. Two were killed and dozens injured in the Arequipa clash before the government suspended the privatizations.

## Doctors strike in Guatemala

Doctors at two hospitals in Guatemala City launched strikes last week to demand higher wages and more resources. Health Secretary Mario Bolanos responded by firing 24 of the striking doctors for not reporting to work.

Strikers claim they are receiving support from other hospital workers across the country. The 360 doctors at the San Juan de Dios and Roosevelt hospitals are especially concerned about the lack of equipment they consider necessary for basic health care. "We need the government to give more," said one doctor, "because I know patients are dying for lack of resources. We want the government to pay attention to this."

Another doctor charged that the government "has money to spend on the department of defense, but here we lack everything."

Doctors are seeking a 20 percent wage increase. Present salaries average about US\$1.20 an hour.

## Mexico City subway workers launch wildcat strike

Subway workers on two of Mexico City's 11 subway lines staged a wildcat strike August 8 to protest hazardous working conditions. The stoppage affected some 500,000 commuters as long lines formed for taxis and buses.

"There is a serious risk of a train derailment or collision on these lines," said union leader Fernando Espino Arevalo, which is "a tragedy, because the monitoring systems don't work and the trains don't receive adequate maintenance."

The city's government denies there is any problem and is considering filing criminal charges against the 200 workers who took part in the strike.

## Queens bus strike ends

The seven-week Queens bus strike came to an end when bus drivers, mechanics and other workers approved a new contract August 6. Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, representing the workers,

reported that with 78 percent of the membership voting, 1,058 voted for ratification and 88 voted against. However, the vote appears to reflect a greater desire by the 1,500 strikers to end the conflict than it does approval of the settlement. This sentiment was dramatically expressed by one worker at the voting booths who complained loudly to the union leaders that this contract is the same as the offer that was brokered three weeks ago.

The strike was a severe financial hardship for the workers. It has been reported that some of them slept in their cars because they were afraid that their vehicles would be repossessed by finance companies.

One of the major issues of the strike was health benefits. A union meeting was held July 14 to consider a plan to finance a 19 percent increase in its funding of health benefits over a two-year period through productivity give-backs by the workers. Queens Borough President Helen Marshall developed this plan in order to end the conflict affecting about 115,000 commuters. With her proposal, the city would lend the three private companies \$2 million to pay for the health benefits. In return, the companies would have to repay that money to the city with monetary savings achieved through work rule changes.

The meeting on the plan broke up as several hundred workers, about one-third of those in attendance, walked out demanding job security. This later issue is more significant because all the private lines operate as franchises with the city. The workers have no guarantee that if the franchise with the company that they work for comes to an end they will be able to keep their jobs.

The majority of the city council voted for a resolution calling for job security for the workers, but this is not legally binding. The contract is retroactive to January 1, 2001 and will expire March 31, 2001, when the same issues will once again confront the workers.

After the vote, TWU Local 100 President Roger Toussaint asserted he was against the strike all along. He said that he had originally advised the bus drivers negotiating committee against walking out. Toussaint's public statements reflect both sharp divisions within the TWU bureaucracy and a defensive reaction to the pent-up frustrations of the rank-and-file.

## Union for striking power workers makes offer

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 50 made a proposal August 9 aimed at trying to bring the strike by 3,700 workers for Dominion Resources Inc. to an end.

Power workers walked off the job August 2 after workers rejected a company offer based on opposition to pension and retirement benefits. The two sides agreed on a 16.5 percent wage increase over the course of a five-year agreement that would raise average yearly pay from \$45,000 to \$52,000. But the company proposal threatened to lower retirement pay and would have ended a \$15 million incentive-pay.

Neither side has commented on the most recent proposal from the union. Dominion serves 2.1 million customers in the Eastern part of the United States.

## Walkout protests firing of union organizers

Workers at Point Blank Body Armor, which makes bullet-proof vests for the US government, walked off the job August 9 after the company fired a third worker for union activity at the company's Oakland Park plant in Florida.

According to the union, some 200 out of a total 320 workers joined the walkout after hearing that yet another worker had been fired. The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) said they expected more workers to join the walkout.

Point Blank, a subsidiary of the DHB Industries in New York, is accused of threatening its mostly Haitian and Latin American workforce with immigration problems if they pressed ahead with the union campaign.

On July 18, workers had marched to the company's executive office to present a union proposal. Company Vice President Ed Lavigne claims that during the action he was hit in the head and knocked to the floor. Police were called to the plant and arrested one worker on charges of disorderly conduct. UNITE denies any violence transpired.

#### **Health care workers charge New Jersey facility with lockout**

Health care workers at the Atrium-at-Wayne nursing facility in New Jersey charge management locked them out on August 4.

District 1199J of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees submitted a strike notice back on July 23, a week before the old contract's expiration. They then claimed to have withdrawn it on August 4, but management denied receiving the notice and proceeded to lock out the workers.

Some 100 nurses' aides, housekeeping and dietary workers are involved in the struggle. Company management has hired 90 workers to replace union members. According to the union, Atrium-at-Wayne is attempting to push through a reduction in days off for the health care workers and decrease the amount the nursing home pays towards the pension fund.

#### **Reno bus drivers locked out**

Some 160 bus drivers and other transportation personnel for the city of Reno, Nevada were locked out after offering to return to work August 9. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 533, had been on strike for five days before the union sent them back to work.

The two sides in the dispute have been unable to come to an agreement over wages. Initially workers demanded a 20 percent pay increase over a three-year period. That has been reduced to 15 percent while the Transit Management of Washoe, which operates the bus system for the Regional Transportation Commission, is only offering 6 percent over the same period.

Only two members of the union voted to accept the agreement when it came before the membership a little more than a week ago. Management has proceeded to recruit replacement workers in an effort to get the system operating again.

When negotiations resume this week, the Teamsters will be seeking to have a mediator present.

#### **New York orchestra strike settled**

Lincoln Center and the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 reached an agreement ending a strike by 42 members of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra. Management backed down on their demand that final say in the dismissal of orchestra members rest in the hands of Lincoln Center's music director.

Instead a review similar to the Metropolitan Opera was instituted, whereby a musician can appeal a dismissal and both union and management participate in the selection of an outside arbitrator.

When management proposed that the music director have complete control over the issue of firings, orchestra members responded with a proposal that a peer review panel comprised of orchestra members or members of other outside ensembles be allowed to reverse management decisions. That proposal was removed by the union in the compromise.

#### **Mediation fails in Vidéotron dispute**

A month-long attempt by a provincial mediator (former Quebec Superior Court Chief Justice Alan B. Gold) to end the strike at the Quebec cable and Internet provider Vidéotron was discontinued without success this week. Some 2,200 Vidéotron workers have been on strike since May

8.

The workers are striking over the company's demand that all restrictions on the contracting out of its services be removed from the collective agreement, and over its demands that employees' workload be increased by a half hour a day and four days a year, with no increase in pay. The workers are also demanding that the sale of its technical services arm, employing 650 installation and repair technicians, to Entourage Technology Solutions, be reversed. Entourage employees are not unionized and have a lower wage.

In addition to using its own non-unionized employees as replacements for the striking workers, Vidéotron has also resorted to outside subcontractors. Although Quebec has laws against the use of scab labor, Vidéotron falls under the relevant federal rather than provincial legislation. A 39-year-old Vidéotron employee was arrested for damaging a vehicle used by a scab subcontractor hired by the company.

At the same time, Vidéotron cable and Internet service was widely and frequently interrupted by 18 separate instances of vandalism against the cable network. The press seized on these acts of vandalism to blackguard the striking Vidéotron workers, accusing them of being behind the sabotaged cables. An unnamed Vidéotron employee, picketing in front of Vidéotron Telecom, told the CBC: "We're not terrorists, for God's sake. We're just fighting for our rights and our jobs."

#### **Air traffic controllers mount limited job actions**

Air traffic controllers across Canada withdrew some training services over the past weekend. Canada's 2,107 air traffic controllers have been without a contract for 18 months, and are engaging in very limited job actions in support of their demands for an end to erratic scheduling and excessive amounts of mandatory overtime.

In June 2002, the air traffic controllers voted 98.9 percent in favor of strike action. A July 31 decision by a federal labor regulator disallowed the withdrawal of air traffic control services. The air traffic controllers are represented by the Canadian Air Traffic Control Association, affiliated with the Canadian Auto Workers Union. They are employed by Nav Canada, a non-profit private corporation created in 1996 in order to remove air traffic control from government hands.

#### **Saskatchewan health workers to conduct strike vote**

Two thousand five hundred Saskatchewan health care workers will conduct a strike vote for what could be the first strike in the 30-year history of their union, the Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan. A mailed ballot and a series of strike meetings will be held August 12-27, with strike action beginning as early as September 6.

The health care workers—who include pharmacists, paramedics and public health workers, employed in hospitals, home-care facilities and community care facilities—have been without a contract for more than a year. In a June 5 vote, 80 percent of the health care workers rejected a tentative agreement with their employer, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO), that would have given 3 percent pay increases in each of the next three years.



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