

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 September 2002

Colombian trade unions threaten general strike

On August 27 Colombia's main unions threatened the newly installed government of President Alvaro Uribe with a general strike of indefinite duration over the government's decision to eliminate benefits that public workers currently enjoy.

"This is unacceptable and we, as workers, must respond with a strike," said Hector Fajardo, general secretary of the United Workers Central (CUT). If the strike takes place, it will be the first under the new government.

The Uribe government decreed that, beginning September 1, extra salaries and bonuses currently being paid by departments and municipalities would be suspended. This measure affects workers in 32 departments and 1,097 cities across Colombia. The purpose of the benefit cuts is to bring the budget into line with an agreement with the International Monetary Fund and raise the military budget by \$1 billion at the same time. Uribe is also aggressively pushing for so-called labor reform legislation, which would raise the retirement age and lower social security contributions by employers, limit overtime and eliminate night and weekend differentials for workers. Uribe claims that such reforms will lower Colombia's 18 percent unemployment.

Workers struggles in Chile

* *Unemployed workers protest*

Two thousand unemployed and underemployed workers from outside Santiago arrived in the city on August 27 to protest against the economic recession and to demand jobs. The "National March Against Layoffs" marched on the Plaza de Armas. On the way, they presented President Ricardo Lagos with a petition.

The workers remained in Santiago for the rest of the week. Gustavo Carrasco, president of the National Coordination of Unemployed and Partially Employed Workers, declared the purpose of the protest was to call attention to the problem of widespread unemployment, which he accused authorities of ignoring.

* *Refuse workers announce strike*

The National Federation of Refuse Workers announced August 30 that garbage workers are prepared to strike across Chile. Union President Armando Soto indicated that both municipalities and private contractors are violating collective bargaining agreements on wages and overtime pay with the workers. He pointed out that due to recent changes in the way trash is collected many workers are being forced to work more than 12 hours a day, without proper compensation. No strike date, however, was announced.

* *Football strike*

Despite threats from club owners that they would be fired, Chilean football players went out on strike August 31 and September 1. Eight games in Chile's professional league were cancelled. Football union leader Carlos Soto declared that the issues are wages and changes in the way clubs pass from a higher to a lower division.

Independent truckers strike in Brazil

Independent truckers went on strike August 25 across Brazil. The strike lasted four days. Over 80 percent of the small owner-operators took part in the strike, which seriously affected transportation in Brazil's mayor ports and refineries.

The operators are demanding a 30 percent reduction in fuel prices and road tolls, freight rate increases, road repairs and better police protection on the roads.

Machinist union proposes revote after Boeing rejects further talks

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) said it will consider asking its 26,000 members at the aerospace manufacturer Boeing to vote again after company officials said they would refuse further negotiations.

The IAM had called on workers to reject Boeing's most recent offer but not, evidently, from the standpoint of launching a strike. Dick Schneider, IAM chief negotiator, had stated in relation to last week's vote: "A strong NO vote on the contract and a strong YES vote on the strike sanction are necessary to give us a powerful bargaining position."

While the vote was being conducted, the IAM bureaucracy also accepted an offer by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) to extend talks for another 30 days. But Boeing has refused the FMCS's offer. The IAM, facing the possibility of a majority of ballots calling for a strike without any prospect of talks, ordered "all ballots be sealed and impounded until further notice." Boeing, on the other hand, is insisting that the IAM count the ballots while the union has said it would re-poll its membership.

With orders for aircraft way down and the company still considering cutbacks among its machinist ranks, Boeing might welcome a strike at this time.

Boeing has emphasized its 8 percent bonus offer, amounting to an average \$4,700 per worker, along with raises of 2 percent and 2.5 percent in the second and third years of the contract. But the company is also proposing to gut contract language that prevents the subcontracting of work. Union members believe that increased health care costs will largely wipe out the bonus and raises. The monthly worker's contribution towards a family medical plan is estimated at \$316.

Negotiations break off at Midwest Express

The union representing 440 Midwest Express flight attendants announced it was prepared to launch isolated strike actions or even an all-out walkout against the Milwaukee-based airline as negotiations broke off after passing an August 29 federally mandated cooling-off period.

For two-and-a-half years the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) has carried on fruitless negotiations with management. Attendants have gone for three years without a raise and management's present contract proposal calls for another year of waiting for frustrated attendants. Attendants are asking for an

immediate 9.5 percent raise followed by two 3 percent raises in the first and second year of the contract. Attendants are also upset over the lack of pension or health insurance proposals in management's contract offer.

The average annual yearly salary for a flight attendant at Midwest is less than \$25,000. Attendants first voted to form a union in April 1999.

United demands pay cuts from Machinists

United Airlines demanded the International Association of Machinists (IAM) surrender a 10.4 percent pay cut to the financially troubled airline in an effort to avoid bankruptcy.

United is also calling for the cancellation of pay increases scheduled for March 14, 2003 and May 1, 2004. This comes on top of a request that the union forgo a 15 percent per year increase in hourly base pay.

According to United, the concessions are necessary in order to obtain a \$1.8 billion loan guarantee from the Air Transportation Stabilization Board. The ATSB was set up in the aftermath of September 11 to bail out the airlines. The loan scheme is predicated upon gaining concessions from each section of workers at United and other airlines seeking federally-backed loans.

University of California workers end strike without contract

University of California clerical workers and lecturers ended their protest strike after three days with mass protests supported by other workers outside the offices of Chancellor Robert Berdahl and President Richard Atkinson. However, the 4,500 strikers are still without a contract.

"This strike is about the lack of fair process to talk about the abysmal conditions [of] university employees," one lecturer said. "We're not striking about those conditions, just about the right to talk and bargain about them."

The union has asked for a 15 percent pay increase. University of California is only offering 2 percent in a retroactive pay increase for last year and a 1.5 percent increase for the present academic year.

Eight hundred workers strike The Bay

Eight-hundred sales associates and stocking clerks at five Ontario locations of The Bay department stores walked off the job Thursday morning, August 29. The strike has resulted in the closure of The Bay's Windsor location, while at Toronto (Sherway Gardens), Brampton, Kingston and Kitchener, management has attempted to muddle on without the striking employees.

The workers are striking against company demands that the current wage grid, based on years of service, be replaced with system of individual incentives—to be distributed at the whim of management, with explicit consideration given to the company's current profit margins. The company was also demanding a drastic reduction in the availability of sick pay, from 16 weeks to 10 days a year.

The Hudson's Bay Company, which owns both The Bay and Zellers department store chains, has a total of 450 stores across Canada, and is pressed by increasing competition from Sears and Wal-Mart to exploit its workforce more intensely. Not all Bay locations are unionized. In Toronto, for instance, while workers are picketing at the Sherwood Gardens location, work continues as normal at the nonunionized Yorkdale mall location.

Lockout at Vancouver grain terminals

In Vancouver, 600 grain terminal workers were locked out August 25 by the terminal operators. The lockout began after the workers—who have been without a contract since June 1, 2001—did not accept a recent contract offer made by the employers. The grain workers are represented by Local 333 of the Grain Workers Union.

The workers are resisting attempts by the terminal operators to require a six-day week, a 10-hour day without overtime pay, and retrenchments in recall rights. The terminal operators want workers with less than 10 years on the job to have no recall rights after being laid off for more than a year. Approximately a third of the 600 workers in the union are currently laid off and some have been laid off for as long as 18 months.

About two thirds of Canada's grain exports leave the country through the Vancouver terminals.

New Brunswick civil servants set to strike

Over a thousand New Brunswick civil servants—including social workers, probation officers and family court mediators—are set to strike early in September. The workers, who are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1418, are demanding significant wage increases and that their workloads be reduced by increased hiring and retention.

In June, the civil servants had voted overwhelming in favor of a strike, after the government offered only a 9 percent wage increase over four years. The union leadership, however, postponed the strike. Talks resumed during the last week, but the government brought an offer to the table that was scarcely different from the offer rejected by the workers in June. The union responded by setting a September 4 strike date.

Toronto hotel workers ratify four-year agreement

Sixteen hundred Toronto hotel workers ratified the agreement reached by Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) Local 75 and Toronto's Central Hotel Group (The Toronto Hilton, the Delta Chelsea and the Sheraton Centre) this week. The four-year contract was supported by 83 percent of workers, and includes a 14 percent wage increase over the four years and a 16 percent wage increase for dishwashers, housekeeping and laundry. There was also a 9 percent wage increase for gratuity workers and an increase in pensions and health and welfare benefits.

Paul Clifford, president and chief negotiator of the local union, extolled the benefits of the settlement to hotel management: "For the corporations, the hotels have labor peace—and we now need to work together to build Toronto's tourism industry in the years to come."



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