Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 September 2002

Brazilian child-welfare workers strike

Employees of Brazil's State Foundation of Child Welfare (FEBEM) struck for 15 hours on September 4 and 5. The workers' demands include no changes in working assignments, a 35 percent raise, overtime pay and increased meal allowances. The strikers agreed to return to work at the urging of the labor court (TRT), pending mediation of their grievances. However, they said that the strike would resume on September 9, barring an agreement.

On September 5, 200 strikers demonstrated across from the labor court offices in Sao Paulo. The Labor Tribunal intervened out of concern that workers be on the job on Friday, the day when imprisoned juveniles receive visits from their FEBEM counselors. A reformatory official stated, "An inmate rebellion was imminent because not having their visits would have been intolerable."

Bahia postal workers on strike

On September 5 employees of the Brazilian Postal and Telegraph Company (EBCT) in the state of Bahia went on strike, blocking the main post office in the state capital, Salvador, with their vehicles. This is the first strike of state postal workers since 1985.

The 45,000 state postal workers are demanding a 36 percent wage increase plus a 10 percent productivity increase. The company has offered 4 percent and a bonus. On September 4, the national Union of Postal Employees canceled a national strike while negotiations continued.

Teachers march in Honduras

On September 6, 1,800 teachers marched along the highway between Puerto Cortes and San Pedro Sula in northwest Honduras, paralyzing traffic out of the country's most important port for four hours.

They are demanding that the government respect teachers' rights and rehire 40 militant teachers, fired by the government. Over 50,000 middle school teachers are demanding a 31 percent wage increase over two years. The government is balking at 12 percent after two years.

"Our intention is to paralyze the nation's economy," said Eulogio Sanchez, president of the Honduran School of Middle Education (COPEMH). "Our strategy contemplates stronger actions. On September 15 we will organize a national march of protest. Our aim is not only in defense of legislation, but against the repression that the government is inflicting on everybody."

Teachers held up signs and chanted their disapproval of the government, demanding an open hearing for the fired teachers. Students from area high schools joined in, including a marching band.

Honduran teachers have been fighting for their rights and wages since March, when the government of Ricardo Maduro rescinded agreements made by the previous government.

Venezuelan workers to strike September 11

Venezuelans Workers' Confederation (CTV) leader Alfredo Ramos announced the "closure of Caracas" on September 11 to protest President Hugo Chavez's "hunger package" of economic austerity measures. The CTV intends to block all access to Caracas and to paralyze traffic within that sprawling city.

Ramos also announced a mobilization for September 12 when citizens will bang empty pots in protest against Chavez, part of a series of actions that will culminate in a mass mobilization the week of September 25 against the imposition of the Value Added Tax on food, medicine and medical services.

While the CTV's protests against the government no doubt reflect the dissatisfaction of workers and the poor, the labor organization has joined with corporate and right-wing groups out to destabilize and oust the Chavez government and replace it with another repressive and anti-working class clique. Chavez has threatened to set up a parallel labor organization that would draw workers away from the CTV.

Machinists union calls for revote on US Airways contract

The International Association of Machinists announced it will call on the 6,800 mechanics at US Airways to vote again on a $160 million per year concessions contract that 57 percent of the workers rejected nearly two weeks ago.

Mechanics opposed a combination of 7 percent pay cuts for workers earning over $14.42 an hour and pay freezes imposed on others. The tentative agreement also demanded cutbacks in vacation, sick days and holidays.

US Airways responded to the mechanics' rebuff by scheduling a September 10 bankruptcy court hearing to seek court nullification of any union contracts where bargaining unit groups have not agreed to concessions that the airline is seeking in order to qualify for a $900 million government-backed loan. To secure the money, US Airways is asking for $950 million in wage and benefits cuts.

The hearing was only cancelled after the IAM agreed to submit the contract for a second vote. The union claimed it was not aware that contracts could be nullified and hoped that the court would modify it or request US Airways to submit a new proposal. Besides concessions, the tentative agreement reserves a seat on US Airways' board of directors for a member of the IAM bureaucracy.

Following airline management's threat against the IAM, the Communication Workers of America, which represents 8,000 customer service agents, endorsed the company's concession contract that calls for $70 million a year in wage concessions. CWA members will complete their vote by September 17.

The climb-down by the IAM and CWA was preceded the day before by US Airways' announcement that it would lay off 1,706 airline workers, many of them part-time employees.

At the time mechanics rejected their agreement, 62 percent of the IAM's 5,450 baggage handlers accepted a similar concessions agreement. US Airways has already obtained $560 million in cuts from pilots, flight attendants and other smaller bargaining units.

Machinists union to put Boeing contract offer up for second vote

Union officials representing 26,000 Boeing machinists announced

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they will resubmit the company's contract offer for a second vote. Two weeks ago union members were encouraged to reject the proposal under conditions where the International Association of Machinists (IAM) accepted a new round of federally mediated talks.

But Boeing refused to participate in any new talks. The IAM, fearing a strong rejection of the contract, halted voting and ordered existing ballots impounded.

Boeing finally did dispatch a negotiating team to Washington DC, but never met face to face with the union during a three-day period in which proposals on job security, health care and pensions were not altered. Boeing is presently offering an 8 percent bonus, amounting to $4,700 per worker. Wages will be increased by 2 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively, in the second and third years of the agreement.

But it is the threat to jobs that has most workers upset. Boeing has inserted language that will allow outside contractors to distribute parts directly to assembly lines. The proposal, according to the union, directly threatens 2,600 union members. The company counters it will only affect 260 workers.

The IAM also charges that the contract seeks to "gut" a past clause that permitted the union to review and respond to company decisions to send work to outside vendors.

There will be two votes on the Boeing contract. The first will be a referendum on the company's contract offer. The second will be the strike vote, which requires a two-thirds majority to be implemented. Without that majority, the contract will be considered ratified.

Police arrest Yale union members

Police arrested four Yale University employees last week for handing out pro-union leaflets outside a Yale-New Haven Hospital facility . Three of the four are officials for Local 34, which represents Yale university clerical and technical workers, currently involved in a contract struggle with the Connecticut university. Each of the arrested workers was charged with criminal trespass.

The arrests came after Local 34 members voted September 4 by a 996-198 margin to empower their union to authorize a job action against Yale. On the same evening, members of Local 35, which represent dining hall, service and maintenance workers, voted 411-50 for strike authorization. Union members are wearing buttons carrying the slogan, "I don't want to strike but I will." Current contracts include a no-strike, no-lockout clause and are effective through October 1.

Both Locals 34 and 35 have attempted to introduce into the negotiations the issue of union organization for 1,800 hospital workers at the Yale-New Haven Hospital under New England Health Care Employees Union Local 1199. The University administration has steadfastly refused to discuss the issue. Already 1199 unionized food service workers at the hospital voted 87-13 to authorize a strike. The 1199 workers have been without a contract for two years.

A coalition of labor unions protested the arrest of the Local 34 members. A spokesperson for the coalition called the arrests "completely outrageous," and pointed out the site where the four were arrested has been used for 20 years to distribute literature, was outside the hospital and did not block any services.

Walkout at Massachusetts campuses to protest education cuts

Shouting "Keep your Word" and demonstrating under the banner "Fund the Contracts," some 5,000 professors, staff and union employees at the University Massachusetts at Amherst held a 30-minute demonstration September 5 to protest the veto by acting Governor Jane Swift of $30 million in negotiated pay raises for higher education workers at five state campuses. The Massachusetts legislature declined to override the veto, paving the way for the cuts.

Faculty and staff at other campuses also held protests, but the bulk of the cut in funds, about $17 million, will affect the Amherst campus. The raises were negotiated during 2000. Amherst administrators have already raised student fees, eliminated seven athletic teams, implemented cuts in the library system, instituted 100 layoffs and phased out other jobs. An additional 121 professors and 391 full-time workers took early retirement. Similar steps have been taken at the state's other public colleges.

Tennessee truck maker locks out autoworkers

Peterbilt Motor Company locked out 750 workers September 3 at its Madison truck plant after negotiators failed to reach an agreement. The three-year contract between the maker of large highway tractor-trailers and the United Auto Workers Local 1832 expired five days earlier. Neither side has disclosed the status of talks.

The previous week, Peterbilt announced that it would lay off 500 workers at the plant in anticipation of slower fall sales. A new Environmental Protection Agency emission standard due to go into effect October 1 will require cleaner engines, thereby raising costs. This situation has created high demand for the recent Peterbilt models that predate the new EPA rules and fewer future orders for the company.

New Brunswick civil servants strike

On September 4, 900 New Brunswick civil servants walked off the job, demanding a wage increase of 14 percent over four years. The workers include social workers, probation officers and family court mediators, among others. The full Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1418 bargaining unit consists of more than 1,200 workers, but 350 are considered "essential services" and denied the right to strike.

The workers have been without a contract for two years, and their main demand is for a wage increase of 14 percent over four years. They are also demanding that extreme workloads be addressed by increased hiring and retention.

Injunction against Saskatchewan health care workers strike

A strike by 2,500 Saskatchewan health care workers that would have begun on September 6 was delayed after the Labour Relations Board of Saskatchewan granted an injunction against the workers to their employer, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO). The workers, who include paramedics, pharmacists, occupational therapists, social workers, dietitians and respiratory therapists, had voted 78.5 percent in favor of strike action earlier in the week. They have been without a contract for a year and are demanding significant wage increases.

In a June 5 vote, 80 percent of the health care workers rejected a tentative agreement reached in February between the SAHO and their union, the Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan. After this vote, the SAHO complained to the labour board that the union negotiating committee had recommended that the membership not ratify the tentative agreement, and was therefore bargaining in bad faith. This week's injunction denies the health care workers their right to strike until after a September 16 hearing about this complaint.

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