

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 September 2002

Mexican VW workers sign pact

On September 3, Volkswagen AG and the union that represents its Mexican workers signed a pact, hours before what would have been the third strike in three years. Union negotiators said they accepted two wage increases of 1.5 percent and 5.5 percent, far less than the 10.2 percent originally demanded. The raise represents no increase in purchasing power because it virtually matches predicted consumer inflation for this year.

Last March the company had threatened to stop expanding operations in Mexico. It offered workers the choice of 1,300 layoffs or pay cuts. Since then, over 5,000 auto jobs have been lost in the Puebla region, fully 20 percent of the workforce.

Paraguay unions strike against the IMF

Paraguayan labor unions joined with civic, rural and commercial organizations in a strike on September 23 against fiscal austerity decrees demanded by the International Monetary Fund. The IMF has made austerity the precondition for any assistance for Paraguay.

In an attempt to diffuse the situation, the government offered to reduce the price of gasoline by 100 guaranies or 1.6 US cents,

Argentine bureaucrats promote boycott of Chilean truckers

Leaders of the dissident wing of Argentina's General Workers Confederation (CGT) denounced Chilean companies and announced that on September 26, Argentine protesters will attempt to block the entry of trucks operated by Chilean drivers.

Unable to present a program of struggle that defends workers' living standards in Argentina, they intend to divert attention with a chauvinist campaign aimed against the supposedly unfair practices of Chilean truckers.

Chilean football strike ends

Soccer players in Chile lifted their strike September 20. The players walked out 21 days earlier to demand an end to pay delays. Team owners had begun replacing striking players with junior division players last week.

Brazilian child-welfare workers threaten to strike

Employees of the State Child Welfare Foundation (FEBEM) vowed to strike October 7 if management does not obey last week's decision by the Regional Labor Court (TRT) awarding a 5 percent raise.

The raise is to appear in workers' pay envelopes on October 7. "This is the limit date that will indicate if the judicial decision will be obeyed," declared a union spokesperson for the welfare employees.

FEBEM officials suggest that the judicial order only applies to those workers earning less than R\$900 (US\$300) a month. Under that interpretation, only 600 out of 7,000 workers would be entitled to the raise.

West Coast port lockout averted

The West Coast port of Long Beach, California resumed full operations this past weekend after the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) withdrew its threat to lock out over 5,000 dockworkers there and at the port in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which is engaged in contract talks on behalf of all 10,500 dockworkers at 29 West Coast ports, filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board claiming the PMA's lockout threat was illegal.

Although the fall period tends to be busy as retailers scramble to stock up for the holiday season, statistics indicate higher than normal levels of cargo being shipped through West Coast ports. The ILWU says the major reason for the increased volume is that shippers are anticipating a lockout by the PMA. The West Coast Waterfront Association, comprised of retailers such as Walmart, has also renewed its call for the Bush administration to use the strikebreaking Taft-Hartley Act in the event of a lockout or strike. Bush administration officials, citing supposed "national security" concerns, have threatened to mobilize the National Guard to occupy the ports and use Navy personnel to move cargo if workers engage in any slowdowns or other job actions.

Among the 79 corporate members that make up the PMA is Seattle-based Stevedoring Services of America (SSA), the largest stevedoring company in the nation and the fourth largest in the world. According to the ILWU, the company, which has severely attacked dockworkers' conditions in South America, New Zealand and other parts of the world, dominates the PMA and "hand picked" the association's president, Joseph Miniace, who has consistently opposed any agreement with the union.

The ILWU has offered concessions that will allow the PMA to implement new technology and eliminate jobs. In return the union has asked for jurisdiction over all remaining jobs, both on the docks and those connected to the new technology. According to the ILWU, many companies that comprise the PMA are willing to reach agreement along these lines, but not the SSA.

On September 18, the ILWU held demonstrations in Seattle, Oakland and Long Beach to specifically target the SSA as responsible for the breakdown of talks. In Oakland, the stevedoring company Maersk ordered the lunch break for dockworkers changed from noon to 11 am, claiming it conflicted a ship scheduled for unloading. Noon also happened to be the time for the rally against SSA and workers refused to accommodate the company and walked off the job to attend the rally. The PMA charged the action constituted a slowdown.

US Airways secures further concessions from unions

US Airways obtained the largest concessions package in airline history from its employees last week when the last remaining

bargaining units finally voted to accept a contract. The 6,800 mechanics represented by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) voted by 57 percent to pass a pact that gives the company \$160 million a year over a six-year period—the equivalent of a 6.8 percent pay cut. Meanwhile, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), representing customer service agents, voted to accept an agreement that cuts wages by an average 8 percent over seven years, although workers earning yearly incomes of less than \$30,000 were exempted from the cuts.

All told, pilots, flight attendants and ground workers gave the bankrupt airlines \$950 million.

“We are extremely pleased with the decision of our employees to willingly support the company’s restructuring plan, and we applaud them for sharing in the sacrifices necessary to restore our company to financial health,” said US Airways Vice President Jerry Glass.

Despite the complicity of the union there was substantial opposition to the concessions demands by rank-and-file workers. In the case of mechanics the agreement was originally rejected. The IAM then resubmitted the agreement, insisting that there was no alternative.

In exchange for its services the IAM bureaucracy will obtain a seat on US Airways’ board of directors. In addition to pay cuts, workers will temporarily give up two holidays that will not be reinstated until 2008. Wages will eventually be raised by 2 percent each year between 2004 and 2007, with an 8 percent increase in 2008. The IAM is claiming that the agreement bars US Airways from seeking further concessions through bankruptcy court.

CWA members will get 2 percent of the airline’s stock after bankruptcy proceedings terminate. The pay for CWA workers will eventually increase by 8.75 percent between 2005 and 2009.

New Haven teachers march on city hall

Hundreds of teachers and parents marched on the New Haven, Connecticut city hall September 19 to protest low wages and inferior working conditions at the city’s schools. One teacher told local newspaper reporters, “New Haven is becoming a district that trains teachers and then they leave for better jobs somewhere else. I could easily find a job that pays \$10,000 more, but I want to teach in New Haven.”

The low pay has caused shortages. One parent pointed out that the Davis Street School had been forced to use a substitute teacher during the past school year. Teachers are demanding certified teachers in every classroom. Also on the teachers’ agenda are smaller classes, competitive medical benefits and a better retirement plan. Teachers are entering the final year of a four-year contract that will expire in 2003.

Saskatchewan health care workers wage limited strikes

Demanding significant wage increases as well as supplementary wage adjustments for chronically underpaid segments of their bargaining unit, a total of 350 Saskatchewan health care workers have walked off the job since September 18. They are part of a larger group of 2,500 health care workers—members of the Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan (HSAS)—who are employed by the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO). The workers include paramedics, pharmacists, occupational therapists, social workers, dietitians and respiratory

therapists.

The union has delayed a strike by the full complement of health care workers. In the words of union President Stan Dimnik: “We don’t want to take 2,500 people out.... Two thousand five hundred people out will close down the system and that’s not what we want. We’re hoping this is a wake-up call.” Nevertheless, on September 21 the union indicated it was considering a full strike if SAHO does not agree to a mediator.

The workers have been without a contract for a year. Legal authorization for a strike had been delayed until the Labour Relations Board of Saskatchewan held a hearing into SAHO allegations that the union was bargaining in bad faith because it did not recommending acceptance of a February 2002 proposal with SAHO. In June, the membership rejected the same proposal. The board ruled that the union had not committed an unfair labor practice, clearing the way for the health care workers to take legal strike action.

Strike of support workers at Wilfrid Laurier University

Four hundred support workers at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario have been on strike since September 16. The strikers include secretaries, telephone operators, as well as workers in counseling and health services, library, computing services and science labs. The workers are represented by the Wilfrid Laurier University Staff Association. No new talks between the administration and the union are scheduled until September 24.

The support workers, whose average wage is \$18.69 per hour, are demanding that the administration jettison proposals aimed at increasing the use of contract labor, increasing hours of work and decreasing job security, benefits and the effectiveness of anti-harassment and grievance procedures. They have been without a contract since June 30.

The faculty association advised its members to continue teaching despite the picket lines. It did instruct its members not to do the jobs of the striking workers. On September 20, faculty and students marched in support of the striking support workers. The university administration has hired a company to videotape picket line activity.



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