

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 October 2002

Peruvian workers strike against President Toledo

Thousands of Peruvian workers carried out a national strike against President Alejandro Toledo on September 26. In Lima a mass demonstration took place against Toledo's economic policies. The day before, Toledo had urged people to ignore the strike call from the Educators union and from the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers, but he was ignored.

Strikes continued on September 26 in Arequipa, 1100 kilometers south of Lima, where the Broad Civic Front organized a 48-hour strike against the privatization of electricity.

Mexico settles oil pact

Mexico's oil workers union dropped a threat to strike the state-owned Petroleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, and signed a one-year contract offering a 7.3 percent pay hike. The settlement was greeted as a victory for the government of President Vicente Fox, as the union had threatened to strike Tuesday to press its demand for a 15 percent hike.

Fox had charged leaders of the 92,000-member union with pressing the demand in an attempt to "blackmail" the government into dropping fraud charges. The government has charged the president of the union, Carlos Romero Deschamps, and other leaders with diverting \$170 million in Pemex funds into the campaign coffers of the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the 2000 presidential election.

Mexico's secretary of labor, Carlos Abascal Carranza, read a statement at the contract-signing ceremony recognizing "the high sense of responsibility and patriotism of the Oil Workers Union and its leaders in agreeing to this increase, putting the good of the country ahead of any particular interest."

Lawyers defending the union officials against the fraud charge as well as a key government official in charge of the fraud investigation were also present at the ceremony, leading some observers to speculate that a deal on the criminal charges could have been offered in exchange for accepting the low salary hike.

Thousands demand "bread, peace and jobs" in Argentina

Some 10,000 workers and unemployed marched on government buildings in the northern city of Tucuman September 27, demanding social assistance from the local Peronist Governor Julio Miranda, who is currently facing corruption charges.

The march, which took place without serious incident, coincided with clashes at the local railway station. Rail workers have struck in the city to protest the recent layoff of 300 of their colleagues.

The growing protest movement has coincided with another decision by the International Monetary Fund to deny fresh credits to Argentina and a new report indicating that 75 percent of the country's children are now living in poverty.

Meanwhile, the government of President Eduardo Duhalde is

continuing to face demands for the release of more than 100 demonstrators in the northeastern province of Jujuy and an accounting for the apparent disappearance of at least eight of those detained during the violent repression of a September 20 protest march. Many of those who remain imprisoned are women and children.

United Airlines unions give concessions

Unions representing pilots, flight attendants and ground workers jointly agreed to offer United Airlines an overall concessions package worth \$1 billion a year over the next five years. The company said it would face bankruptcy without the concessions. UAL is seeking a \$1.8 billion loan guarantee from the government's Air Transportation Stabilization Board or a private party.

Last month, UAL's outgoing chairman John Creighton demanded the unions come up with \$1.5 billion over six years. UAL's new chairman, Glen Tilton, has yet to comment on the proposal.

The joint coalition of labor bureaucrats accompanied the giveback offer with an obsequious letter to management, promising United, "We will not let it fail.... We look forward to working with you to implement the coalition framework, to secure financing for the company." The unions calculate the concessions will lead to annual profits of \$2-3 billion. The separate unions, who have seats on the board of directors of the so-called employee-owned company, have not decided yet on how the concessions will be divided among the different bargaining units.

United lost \$2.1 billion in 2001 and another \$341 million in the previous quarter. Following the example of US Airways, which announced bankruptcy last month in order to extort concessions from its workers, UAL threatened to do the same as a way to break workers' resistance to bailing out the airlines.

Civil disobedience protest at Yale University

New Haven police arrested 800 workers and students demonstrating against Yale university officials and hospital management for their refusal to negotiate and recognize workers' rights to organize.

Protesters gave advance notice of their decision to occupy the well-trafficked College Street and signed "pre-arrest" forms with the police department in what was the largest mass arrest since the 1960s. Arrested demonstrators received \$88 infraction notices for taking part in the protest.

The protest was organized by the Federation of Hospital and University Employees. Two university locals, one representing clerical workers and the other food service workers, have been negotiating since contracts expired last January without success and members voted to strike when extended contracts expire on

October 1. While new talks are scheduled for the month of October, it is not clear if the unions will follow through on their pledge to strike.

Meanwhile, the New England Health Care Employees Union Local 1199 is seeking to organize some 1,800 service and maintenance workers at the Yale-New Haven Hospital. In the past month, hospital security guards have arrested six workers and union officials from the clerical workers union, Local 34, and two members of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization for leafleting on hospital property

Yale workers have directed much of their fire at university President Richard Levin, whom they hold responsible for the slow pace in contract talks, while at the same time pointing out he also sits on the Yale-New Haven Hospital's board of directors.

Yale university spokesman Tom Conroy responded to the union's charges of bad-faith negotiating, charging, "their wage proposals are too high."

Tentative agreement in Pennsylvania Boeing strike

Boeing Company officials and negotiators for 1,400 striking workers at the company's helicopter plant in Ridley Township near Philadelphia reached a tentative agreement September 28 over work rules and seniority rights.

Complete details of the settlement are not known. However, United Auto Workers Local 1069 officials indicate that the company has withdrawn its demand to use seniority to rehire laid-off workers to jobs on a plant-wide basis. The union wanted to restrict the company's ability on a department-by-department basis.

The Philadelphia Boeing plant manufactures the Chinook helicopter and Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft for the military and, according to reports, Pennsylvania Congressmen Bobby Brady (Democrat) and Curt Weldon (Republican) weighed in during the talks to warn that the strike could jeopardize further government contracts.

When workers struck the plant on September 14, the company had been offering two \$2,000 lump-sum payments in the first two years of a three-year agreement, along with a 2 percent wage increase in the final year. Boeing wanted workers to assume responsibility for 10 percent of medical costs, whereas in the past these expenses were completely covered by the company. Local 1069 members are expected to vote on the agreement within the next week.

Saskatchewan health care strike widens

What began two weeks ago as piecemeal action by select groups of health care workers has grown into a province-wide strike by 2,500 public health employees against the New Democratic Party government of Lorne Calvert.

The strike comprises health care workers in 27 different occupations who are represented by the Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan (HSAS), many of whom have been without a contract for over a year. They have been negotiating with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO), which represents the government, for significant wage increases to bring them into parity with other provinces. With up to 50 percent vacancy in some areas and turnover rates of over 30 percent, the union is also seeking incentives to retain current

staffing levels and for future recruitment

Union officials from the outset made it clear they wanted to avoid an all-out confrontation, but were forced to expand the strike when mediated negotiations broke down last week. Union President Stan Dimnik expressed his dismay, proudly stating that in the union's 30-year history it had never rejected an agreement. "For a union of professionals in Saskatchewan to take this kind of action, matters have really come to a dire point."

The government has indicated that it is considering ordering an end to the strike sooner rather than later and Premier Calvert has suggested that such strikes may be banned in the future.

Strike targets New Brunswick government

A month-old strike by 1,200 government workers in the Maritime province of New Brunswick has grown increasingly bitter as contract talks resumed under a media blackout last week. Some strikers recently occupied government offices in parts of the province while others have taken to picketing the office of Tory Premier Bernard Lord in the capital of Moncton. Last week over 1,000 workers staged a march to the provincial legislature to protest the government's handling of the strike.

The striking government service workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1418, have been without a contract for two years and have been off the job since September 4. They are fighting for improvements in wages as well as measures to recruit and retain staff. Services affected include social work, probation offices and nursing homes.

Some other unions have indicated they may join the walkout if the government goes forward with a threat to introduce back-to-work legislation in anticipation of a visit by the Queen on October 11.



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