

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 October 2002

Columbus day protests against economic oppression

Thousands of workers, peasants and native people protested on October 12 throughout Latin America against oppressive economic conditions and the Latin American Free Trade Agreement (LATFA) being proposed by the Bush administration.

In El Salvador members of peasant and trade union organizations blocked roads and border crossings to protest LAFTA and the Puebla-Panama Plan of regional economic integration. Others blocked access to the San Salvador Airport with stones and tree trunks.

In Nicaragua, hundreds demonstrated across from the Inter-American Development Bank in Managua against privatizations and other neo-liberal economic policies.

In Honduras, a five-block long march of agricultural workers marched in Tegucigalpa, carrying signs calling for a Central America-wide general strike to block privatizations and neo-liberal economic policies. In the city of La Ceiba, protesters demanded no increases in the price of basic foodstuffs, the municipalization of water services and women's rights.

At other protests in Chile, Guatemala and Mexico, demonstrators denounced the oppression of native peoples along with the economic policies favored by US imperialism and adopted by many of the governments in the continent.

Santiago's Medical University declared its support for a strike by CONFENATS, the Confederation of Health Workers. The strike will take place on October 15 and 16. The purpose of the job action is to protest a draft medical reform law, AUGE, which opponents see as a step toward the privatization of Chile's public health system.

Chilean Health Minister Osvaldo Artaza threatened to jail strikers under provisions of the State Security Law if a strike takes place. CONFENATS leaders have not canceled the walkout, and declared that state repression would only increase public support for health workers.

Deplorable conditions among Dominican cane field workers

A just released report from the International Labor Organization (ILO), says that workers' rights are being violated in the Dominican Republic, especially in the free trade zones and in the sugar-cane fields. According to the report, despite legal guarantees, workers are prevented from forming trade unions. The employers use intimidation and violence against unions that fight for workers' rights. While about ten percent of the labor force in the Dominican Republic as a whole belongs to a union, among field and free trade zone workers the figure is only 3 percent. Union militants are summarily fired and blacklists circulate among potential employers. In one case a company shut down when workers called for negotiations. It reopened under a different name several months later, and refused to rehire its former workers.

In another incident, the National Police attacked a peaceful workers rally in front of a factory and 21 protesters were placed in jail cells under deplorable conditions. Those arrested included 16 women, many of whom were pregnant. In another protest, 35 people were arrested, including children down to five years of age.

In the free trade zones women are routinely forced to accept lower hourly wages and work more hours per day than their male counterparts. Even worse conditions exist in the sugar-cane plantations that employ Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent. The report also indicates that

while the minimum age for working in the Dominican Republic is 14, many minors below that age are forced to leave school and end up working in Dominican cities.

Dominican unemployed sugar workers demand compensation

Eighty-five percent of the workers who were employed in the state-owned sugar industry in the Dominican Republic in 1999 are now unemployed. Many live in precarious shacks and suffer under miserable conditions. The 25,536 workers that used to work in the ten sugar mills privatized three years ago are demanding that the government pay them overtime hours, retirement funds and pensions that are still owed to them.

A year ago the fired workers formed the Unitary Federation of Sugar Workers (FUTRAZUCAR) to fight for what is owed to them. FUTRAZUCAR leaders report that on October 30, 1999 the government and the new sugar mill owners suspended the contracts of all the workers. At that time the government promised that it would pay the workers' accumulated salaries, including back wages and their retirement contributions.

Salvadorean doctors to extend strike

Despite assurances from President Francisco Flores that the Salvadoran Social Security System would not be privatized, public health doctors are continuing their three-month struggle. Calling Flores' declaration "superficial and not serious" the strikers accused the president of lying, by not proposing alternatives to resolve the conflict.

Beginning this week the entire network of public hospitals will join the strike. The doctors insist that they will not stop until they receive an ironclad decree from the government that the health system will not be privatized. The striking doctors offered to negotiate with Flores to end the health care crisis.

University workers threaten strike in Mexico

The Union of Employees of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (STUNAM) expects university management to respond to its demand for a 40 percent wage increase by the end of the month. "Otherwise it will be difficult to avoid a strike," declared STUNAM Secretary Agustin Rodriguez Fuentes.

His union represents more than thirty thousand administrative and academic workers. Barring any agreement, the strike would begin in the first week of November. According to Rodriguez, the wage demand is "not exaggerated," since buying power for university employees has fallen by more than 80 percent in the last two decades.

As a first step the workers will have a mass assembly this week in front of the Treasury Department in Mexico City's Zocal Square demanding that the 2003 budget allocate enough money to meet STUNAM'S and the other university unions' demands.

Massachusetts governor cancels employer contract

Massachusetts Governor Jane Swift cancelled the state's custodial contract with Unico Service Company after the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) threatened to expand their strike to four state buildings. Among the buildings threatened with pickets would have been the State House, putting legislators in the exposed position of having to directly deal with the Boston-area janitors who are entering their third week on strike.

Besides low wages, the janitors are protesting the fact that only 1,900 of

the 10,700 of the city's janitors have full-time jobs, and only through full-time status can workers receive health benefits.

None of the 81 janitors who clean the state buildings had health coverage for their families or preventive coverage for themselves. Governor Swift said that future bids for custodial work the state would favor companies that provide the opportunity for full-time employment. She did not, however, endorse the workers' demand that part-time workers receive health benefits. The SEIU leadership in turn has pledged not to call workers out on strike at Capitol buildings, nor will it put up picket lines in the area.

Unicco is considered the most intransigent of the 30 companies covered in the union contract. Last weekend Unicco offered a new proposal that would provide more money to eliminate expected increases in the cost of purchasing family health coverage. Few janitors can afford to purchase insurance out-of-pocket, however, given the fact that they receive wages of \$9.95 to \$10.20 an hour.

Wal-Mart charged with labor violations in Nevada

A National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) judge has ordered the retail giant Wal-Mart to post notices at three of its Las Vegas stores pledging to obey the law. The NLRB ruled that more than 20 managers at the stores had harassed workers who evinced support for a union organizing drive by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.

Wal-Mart dismissed the ruling, saying, "If you look at the number of associates and stores we have, the number of incidents alleged is small and the number of allegations upheld by the judge is smaller still."

In fact, Wal-Mart is facing suits in a total of 30 states for allegedly violating labor law in relation to union organizing and other workplace issues. In particular it has come under scrutiny for wage abuses. One widespread practice has been to lock the exit doors of their stores after employees clock out at the end of their shift, forcing employees to work off the clock and cutting labor costs. The company is also accused of pressuring employees to work during their breaks and of doctoring time cards to avoid overtime costs.

In Colorado the company settled a suit alleging labor law violations but details of the settlement remain sealed. In Michigan lawyers are preparing for a court hearing charging the company with "systematic scheme of wage abuse against its hourly employees." Another case involving 400 workers in Portland, Oregon also goes to federal court in November.

The charges against Wal-Mart might very well have been more widespread except for possible pressure applied by the Bush administration. In early 2001, Leonard Page, the NLRB's general counsel, was dismissed from his job as he began to look at a widespread pattern of abuses by Wal-Mart against workers' attempts to unionize. The NLRB claims there was an "insufficient basis to seek a nationwide order against Wal-Mart."

Workers strike Texas industrial company

Over 500 workers walked off the job at Lufkin Industries October 7 after workers rejected the company's last offer by a 64 percent margin. According to union officials, workers are upset about the company's health insurance package both for current and retired employees.

Retired workers are finding most of their pension is consumed by expenses for health care and prescription drugs. Union officials indicated that workers have for some time taken note of quarterly bonuses being doled out to company executives. Kerroy Thomas, chief steward for the Machinists union at the plant, told the *Lufkin Daily News*, "We want the company to do right by us, we're the ones putting out the product."

The Texas manufacturer plans to continue production during the strike. It produces equipment for the oilfield industry, power transmission products, foundry castings and highway truck trailers.

Garbage strike in Washington state

Trash haulers south of Tacoma, Washington went on strike October 7 to demand better health benefits and shorter hours from Waste Connections.

The 50 strikers, members of the Teamsters union, complain they are consistently required to work 13-hour to 15-hour days.

During negotiations, company management refused to consider a union proposal to limit the workday to 12 hours maximum. "We don't have a family life," striker Glen Dunbar told the News Tribune.

Union officials estimated that when factors such as the cost of health benefits were factored in, the company's proposal amounted to a 40 cent per hour pay cut.

Waste Connection workers service about 65,000 residents of Pierce County. Management is bringing replacement workers from its other operations to maintain garbage collection during the strike. Waste Connection has contracts in twenty different states. The company's overall target revenues are estimated to be \$500 million during the present year.

Minnesota teacher strike settled

Teachers from International Falls voted to return to work October 14, after the school board and negotiators for Education Minnesota Local 331 reached an agreement covering 100 teachers. The final agreement calls for a 5.5 percent salary increase. Details of how the proposal will be implemented over the next two years are not clear. The school board previously insisted that increases be limited to 1 percent in the first year and 4 percent in the second. The union had been demanding raises of 3.5 percent and 3 percent respectively.

Auto workers union threatens strike against DaimlerChrysler

Despite agreements reached with Ford and General Motors, the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) says they may be forced to call a strike against DaimlerChrysler to win a new contract if a deal isn't reached by the strike deadline of midnight October 15.

CAW president Buzz Hargrove has reported that the company has been unwilling to match the pattern settlements reached at the other two auto makers last month, an indication that the company would like to see a strike for its own reasons. DaimlerChrysler has undertaken a global restructuring plan in recent months to cut costs, including the elimination of 3,000 jobs in Canada. Moreover, the company has already planned 10 weeks of shutdowns at a number of plants in Ontario before the end of this year.

The union has said that although it is prepared for a long strike, given the company's plans, it would hurt the workers more than DaimlerChrysler. The company has reportedly demanded the rollback of work place rights that have been in place for years. The union has said that it has made no provision for the jobs of 1,200 workers which will be lost when the Pillette Road assembly plant in Windsor is closed next July.

A strike would affect 13,000 CAW workers and would be the first against the Big Three automakers since the strike at General Motors in 1996, which lasted 22 days. Negotiators for DaimlerChrysler have said that they are confident a deal can be reached before the deadline. For its part, the CAW leadership has cultivated a close relationship with the auto companies, urging them to shut plants in the US instead of Canada because of the favorable currency exchange rate and lower health care costs in Canada.

Newfoundland doctors strike enters third week

The Liberal government of Newfoundland has indicated it may bring an end to a strike by the province's doctors which began October 1 by sending the dispute to binding arbitration.

930 physicians who are members of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA) went on strike to bring their wages in line with those paid to their counterparts throughout the other Maritime Provinces. Negotiators for the doctors rejected the latest offer by the province, saying the offered increase of \$4 million still falls short of their demands.

The strike has brought a halt to all elective surgery and resulted in long lines at emergency rooms in 15 hospitals across the province. Although

emergency care has continued throughout the strike, a spokesman for the doctors has indicated that they may increase pressure on the government by withdrawing emergency services in some rural clinics.



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