

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 May 2003

Solidarity train detained in Buenos Aires

Government authorities detained a 16-car train with supplies destined to the flood-ravaged city of Santa Fe, in northeast Argentina. The cargo, consisting of food, clothing, blankets, coats and mattresses, had been collected by organizations representing the unemployed, students, neighborhood assemblies and striking workers from Buenos Aires' Brukman textile plant.

The shipment was delayed 48 hours after authorities insisted that it would not allow the unemployed to control distribution of the supplies. Under pressure, the Duhalde government relented and allowed the shipment to proceed on May 11.

Over 20,000 were made homeless from the floods of the Salado River in southern Santa Fe. The crisis caused an outpouring of public solidarity from all corners of Argentina. However, the government has been criticized for using the aid that it controls for political patronage, prompting the unemployed to insist that only they will control disbursement of the much-needed help.

Salvadoran health workers prepare protests

Striking public health doctors from El Salvador's Social Security Institute announced May 6 that they would demand government approval of an "amnesty law" for striking doctors and public health workers. The law would mandate the rehiring of more than 350 doctors and public health employees and include the payment of their back wages. The strike began eight months ago with the objective of preventing the privatization of health services.

The week before, Salvadoran President Francisco Flores had vetoed an amnesty law the legislature had passed. Flores threatened if the veto were overturned he would seek swift action by the courts to declare it unconstitutional.

Federal police attack Mexican teachers

On May 9 members of the Preventive Federal Police (PFP) assaulted teachers demonstrating at a government ministry in Mexico City. The teachers, members of the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) from the state of Oaxaca, are demanding a 100 percent wage increase and the hiring of more teachers. Two teachers who eluded PFP officers and climbed the fence into the ministry were physically expelled.

The CNTE is a dissident wing of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), which is closely allied to the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Two days earlier, the CNTE teachers occupied the Federal Elections Commission building to protest the candidacy of former SNTE leader Elba Gordillo for the legislature. Gordillo, a prominent PRI leader, is accused of looting the union treasury.

Scores of Oaxaca teachers had been in Mexico City to press their demands when the incident occurred. On May 15—the official

"Teachers Day" in Mexico—the CNTE will lead mass demonstrations in the capital city to further the struggle.

Central bank strike in Bolivia

Central bank workers in Bolivia went on strike May 8 over the decision of the government to cut public workers' wages by 10 percent, part of a plan to reduce the budget deficit from 8.5 percent to 6.5 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

An earlier attempt by the government to impose income taxes to balance the budget resulted in civilian protests in February. Twenty-eight were killed and 200 injured, forcing the government to back down.

California dairy settles lawsuit with farmworkers

A dairy farm in Sonoma County, California agreed to settle a lawsuit by paying \$235,000 to eight Mexican immigrant workers who were denied regular and overtime wages, rest and meal breaks and compelled to live in squalid housing on the Cypress Lane Ranch. The California Department of Housing and Community Development cited dairy operators Tony and Charles Spaletta last year for 55 housing code violations and for failure to have a license to provide workers with living quarters.

"My firm does farmworker cases throughout the state of California, and I have never seen housing that was this bad," Mark Talamantes, who represented the workers, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Talamantes said the three mobile home trailers and one building that housed the workers had holes in the floors, broken windows, rat and insect infestations and no insulation, causing them to turn into virtual ovens during summer months.

When workers complained about pay and living conditions to the owners in January of 2002, the Spalettes fired them. Three of the workers were unable to find immediate alternative living conditions so the Spalettes served them with eviction notices.

NLRB hearing into company-union mobster relations

The NLRB will hold a July hearing in New York to investigate charges that Consolidated Bus and Teamsters Local 854 retaliated against two workers and their supporters who tried to remove a shop steward through a petition for a new election.

When Jona Fleurimont and Jose Guzman initiated their petition campaign, company security guards began spying on them. This was followed by threats of violence from company executives and vandalism to Fleurimont's car. Supporters of the two workers were also illegally questioned and harassed and threatened with arrest if they signed the petitions. Local 854 President Daniel Gatto is personally charged with threatening, assaulting and harassing Fleurimont.

During the 1990s, prosecutors linked Consolidated Bus to organized crime. An internal Teamsters report claimed Local 854 was tied to the Gambino crime family from 1950 to 1993.

Hawaiian nurses strike hospital

Over 60 registered nurses struck Wahiawa General Hospital in Honolulu May 5 in opposition to management's cutting of health benefits. Nurses claim the hospital is raising health care premiums to finance a wage package that calls for increases of 19 percent over the course of a three-year contract.

The Wahiawa strike comes in the wake of the island's largest strike ever when, at the beginning of the year, 1,400 nurses struck for seven weeks. No new talks are scheduled in the present strike.

Teamsters official removed for charging union for personal expenses

The Teamsters union removed the president of Local 528, who represents AirTran Airways mechanics in Atlanta, after an internal investigation revealed Kenneth Hilbush had charged thousands of dollars in personal expenses to the union.

Hilbush used his Teamsters expense account to pay for trips to Tampa, Florida, where his future wife resided and to pay for Las Vegas hotel accommodations around the time of his wedding. Hilbush also paid for a trip to Florida with an AirTran manager and travel to Alabama that dovetailed with the schedule for the University of Alabama's home football games.

Local 528 has a membership of 400 workers who pay monthly dues fees of \$59. Hilbush's annual pay in 2001 came to \$91,585 based on a salary of \$74,021 and additional disbursements for business totaling \$17,564.

UN food service workers wildcat over lost vacation pay

Food service workers staged a wildcat strike at the United Nations headquarters in New York May 2 when a contract management changed robbed them of reimbursement for vacation pay. Restaurant Associates Inc., which lost the UN contract in March, refused to award any vacation pay to workers that came due after May 2. Aramark Corporation, which won the new contract and is the largest US foodservices company, said it would not honor vacation time accrued before May 2.

The wildcat strike closed down cafeterias and bars in the UN's 40-acre complex. While UN delegates have been known to drag their feet when starvation inflicts itself on populations around the world, by 1:00 p.m. bureaucratic lethargy was nowhere to be seen. A high-ranking UN delegate ordered the food service utilities opened despite the lack of staff. An Aramark executive described the ensuing scene as "chaos, wild, something out of a war scene," as the distinguished delegates and staff sacked the restaurants and bars, stripping them bare of food, liquor and silverware as well.

Talks ordered at Air Canada unions

A court order has been issued to compel the insolvent airline Air Canada and five affected unions to begin mediated talks for the imposition of massive wage and benefit concessions this week. The company had announced its intention to seek union approval without ratification for a 10 percent cut in wages across the board beginning immediately. The Air Canada Pilots Association last week announced its intention to accept the company demand, paving the way for other unions to follow suit.

Canada's largest airline, Air Canada was granted bankruptcy protection last month and is already proceeding with at least 3,600 layoffs out of a total workforce of almost 40,000. The airline also announced that the 10 percent wage cut would be imposed on

management and nonunion employees. Air Canada has said it is looking to cut \$770 million or one quarter of wages from a total annual expenditure of \$3 billion. It is also seeking an additional \$400 million in pension payouts.

The head of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, which represents clerks at Air Canada, applauded the intervention of the courts saying it could help speed up the restructuring process. The airline and the unions will have until May 21 to reach their agreements.

Nova Scotia strike spearheads protest

A month-long strike by 250 provincial government mental health workers prompted an angry protest last week at the provincial legislature against the Tory government's restrictions on union access. Over 500 demonstrators attempted to enter the legislature but were barred by security guards and police.

The striking workers are members of the Nova Scotia General Employees Union (NSGEU) and were joined by other union members holding their annual convention in Halifax. The union is fighting for wage parity with workers at the Nova Scotia Hospital. The strikers are employed by a non-profit agency funded by the province and earn just over \$13 an hour.

Saskatchewan doctors set to strike

Approaching what could be the first strike in over 40 years, doctors in Saskatchewan have rejected the New Democratic Party government's latest wage offer. The provincial government is offering an increase of 20 percent over three years, but doctors are demanding up to 27 percent which they say is the minimum to maintain staffing levels and recruit new doctors in the province. The 1,650-member Saskatchewan Medical Association is planning an emergency meeting this week to discuss a range of job actions but have indicated a full-scale strike is a real possibility.

In a related development in neighboring Manitoba, which is also governed by the NDP, over 3,400 medical technicians may go on strike if a mediator's recommendations for wage increases of only 9 percent over three years are rejected in a vote to be held this week.



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