

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 May 2003

Labor protests continue in Costa Rica

On May 20, on the third day of a strike by electric utility workers, and during a three-hour strike by government employees, Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco called for a negotiated solution, while at the same time giving assurances that the government will not give in under pressure. Pacheco has appealed to the courts to declare the labor protests illegal.

The utility workers at the Costa Rican Electric Institute (ICE) are demanding that the government authorize a US\$100 million bond issue to prevent the sacking of 3,000 workers.

The public employees are demanding better wages. Two out of the three education workers' unions began a strike on May 23 protesting delays in their paychecks.

Teachers strike in Ecuador

On May 14, 112,000 teachers went on an indefinite strike across Ecuador, demanding the government allocate US\$165 million to improve schools and raise wages. On Monday, May 19, thousands of teachers protested and confronted police throughout the country. In Quito and Guayaquil, Ecuador's two largest cities, police squads using tear gas attacked the educators.

Public supports education workers' strike in Peru

Approximately 280,000 Peruvian educators, on strike for an indefinite duration over wages, are receiving increasing public support. A recent poll by the Apoyo agency indicates that 84 percent of the public supports the teachers. The strikers are demanding an increase in pay. The government of President Alejandro Toledo has offered 100 soles a month (less than US\$30). So far, the teachers have rejected the offer and held out for 210 soles. On May 22, a striking teacher died of a heart attack at a union rally in Lima. She had been a teacher for 20 years and was making 800 soles a month.

Toledo's popularity has plummeted in recent days. Only 16 percent of the public supports him, while a whopping 81 percent declared their lack of confidence in him, nearly the same number that support the teachers. Forty-nine percent indicated that they do not believe Toledo's promise of doubling teacher pay by the end of his rule in 2006.

Beginning May 26, other layers of the labor movement are set to strike in support of the teachers, including agricultural workers, health employees, transit workers and employees of the courts.

Farmers, members of the National Irrigation Board (JNR), announced that they will support a national strike. In addition to supporting the teachers, they are demanding government credits for their crops, protection against foreign competition and a lowering of administrative fees. Such a strike would quickly cut food supplies to Lima and other important cities.

On May 27, doctors, nurses and clerks at the public health

system are also set to strike over wages.

Settlement in New York nursing home strike

Striking nurses voted by a wide margin to end their 77-day strike against the Rosewood Gardens and Guilderland Center nursing homes in East Greenbush under terms that had been reached a month earlier. The 100 LPNs, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199, obtained a 13.5 percent wage increase over the course of a three-year agreement along with health care and child care benefits and a clause that prevents permanent workers from being replaced by temporary workers.

The issue that prolonged the strike was a formula demanded by management whereby a reduction in government funding to the nursing homes would trigger reductions in workers' pay. The union ultimately recommended the contract be ratified on the grounds that the budget recently passed by the New York State legislature provides sufficient money to cover the terms of the agreement. Even if true, the clause can set a precedent for other contracts that will be implemented under future government shortfalls.

Michigan auto parts plant strikes over medical

The 115 members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at Michigan Rivet Corp. in Warren are beginning their third week on strike against the company's demand to end 100 percent of health care costs and pass a significant share onto its workforce. Michigan Rivet wants workers to assume 20 percent of costs on the employer-approved network and 40 percent when using health care providers outside that network.

The UAW has abandoned the position of company responsibility for covering these costs and is agreeing that workers should pay 10 percent of costs within the network and 20 percent outside the network. Wages for Michigan Rivet workers range from US\$12 to US\$20 an hour.

Northwest Airlines flight attendants consider leaving Teamsters union

Flight attendants at Northwest Airlines began voting last week on whether they will decertify the Teamsters union and affiliate with the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA). The vote extends over four weeks with results to be made available June 19.

The PFAA began its campaign to win support for new representation in June 2002. Two weeks later, Teamsters international president James Hoffa placed Local 2000 in trusteeship and removed local leaders for not sufficiently opposing the PFAA. At the time, the local leadership took the position they should attempt to work with PFAA dissidents. This month, the displaced leaders announced their support for the PFAA.

The experience of Northwest flight attendants with the

Teamsters became extremely bitter during the last contract struggle, when the union continuously attempted to force workers to accept what was clearly a pro-company contract. The struggle climaxed with a partial retreat by the company in the wake of company firings for a sick-out and government raids against two rank-and-file attendants who operated opposition web sites.

New Jersey nuclear power workers walk out

Workers at the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant in New Jersey walked out May 22 after the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rejected a complaint by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) that a contract imposed on April 14 was unfair.

AmeriGen, which owns the New Jersey facility and nine other nuclear plants across the country, has insisted on reducing the workforce by 15 percent through contract language that will require workers to perform multiple jobs. The workforce at the facility has already been cut from 850 to 450 since AmeriGen bought the plant in 2000. The contract covering 215 IBEW workers at the plant expired last October and was extended through January of this year. Since then, negotiations have been unable to resolve the issue.

Verizon workers strike in North Carolina

Verizon workers in 11 North Carolina counties walked out on strike May 19 over low wages and management's attempt to cut sick days, emergency medical leave, and a floating holiday, and implement forced overtime. Membership in the Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 3673 has dropped from 500 to the present 170 who are on strike.

Jobs that were previously done by 12 workers are now being done by a mere four. This has led to an enormous increase in overtime. One worker told the *Sylvia Herald* newspaper that he performed 980 hours during all of last year. In the period immediately before the strike, he worked 21 consecutive days without time off.

Ontario government to order locked-out teachers back to work

The Tory government of Ernie Eves introduced legislation last week to order an end to the lock-out of 3,500 teachers at the Toronto Catholic District School Board that began May 16. The move marks a sharp shift to the right by the Eves government in embittered contract battles with teachers over the past school year.

Catholic elementary school teachers in Toronto were locked out in the largest action ever of its kind in Ontario after refusing to abide by the school board's demands to end a work-to-rule campaign. Teachers at 169 Catholic schools in Toronto, along with teachers across the province, have been embattled with school boards impoverished by government cuts in their fight to maintain public education in the province. These teachers are asking for modest increases in wage and benefits and have been without a contract since last September.

In the run-up to a provincial election this year, the Eves government has hardened its conciliatory attitude in the education disputes, pledging to make teachers strikes illegal if it is returned to power. The back-to-work legislation is not expected to pass until later this week due to delaying tactics by the Liberals and the NDP.

Hospital workers on strike in Montreal

Support and service staff at the Notre-Dame Hospital in Montreal went on a strike last weekend after a two-day walkout by more than 600 workers to protest planned job cuts and increased workloads. Hospital management has charged the strikers with failing to provide essential services during the walkout, and a court is to decide the case this week.

The striking workers are members of a union affiliated with the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) that represents more than 2,000 orderlies, nurse's aides, receptionists and housekeeping staff. They are fighting plans to cut at least 20 jobs and a new computer system that effectively reduces the pay of workers while increasing their workload. Their current contract expires at the end of June.

Hospital administrators have threatened to suspend the union executive and have said that until the court rules on contempt of court charges, they will consider any form of strike illegal. The union disputes the charges, saying that essential services have and will be maintained. If found guilty, union representatives face fines of up to C\$50,000 and imprisonment of over one year.

Striking workers blockade Nova Scotia parliament

Over 200 striking government workers employed at group homes in the province held a major demonstration at the provincial legislature last week, barricading the doors for several hours in a protest against stalled talks in their contract dispute.

Around 250 members of the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE) work for a provincially funded private employer predominantly in the Halifax area that operates group homes caring for mentally challenged patients. They have been on strike for nearly two months for significant wage increases to bring them parity with their counterparts at the Nova Scotia Hospital.

It is the second time in the course of their strike that workers have besieged government offices, and their union has said they will continue such demonstrations until the government offers more funding in negotiations. The union had asked that the dispute be settled by conciliation, but refused to return to the bargaining table last week when it was made clear that no new money would be available.



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