

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 June 2003

## Colombia: national strike by public employees

Half a million government workers struck on Thursday, June 19, to protest the plans of President Alvaro Uribe to privatize state-owned companies. What sparked the strike of tens of thousands of workers was the closure of Telecom, the national communications company. The company immediately opened under another name, Colombia Telecomunicaciones S.A., but with 5,000 fewer workers.

A similar plan is being considered for the Social Security Institute (ISS), already partially privatized. Funding for the ISS department that oversees medical care for retirees would be substantially reduced, cutting the number of clinics from 37 to 25 and eliminating 9,000 workers over four years. Workers also fear that similar plans are in store for Ecopetrol, the government-owned oil company. Colombian unemployment already hovers above 15 percent.

Uribe claims that the changes are necessary to free government funds that will be transferred to the military campaign against the guerrilla armies. In Bogotá, thousands of workers rallied at the Telecom headquarters holding signs that said, "No more belt-tightenings ordered by the United States" and "Uribe rapes and murders democracy."

## National strike in Uruguay

On June 17, Uruguayan workers struck for 24 hours, protesting low wages and the lack of jobs and adequate housing. Middle-class neighborhoods in Montevideo turned off their lights and residents beat pots and pans in support of the workers' demands. This was the fifth general strike since President Jorge Batlle took power three years ago.

Sources at Uruguay's union federation (PIT-CUT) estimated that 90 percent of Montevideo's workers and 70 percent of those in the interior participated in the work stoppage. Real wages for workers have dropped in Uruguay by 20 percent since last year; officially, the rate of unemployment is 18.9 percent.

## Striking teachers rally in Costa Rica

On June 17, hundreds of striking teachers marched in San José and rallied in front of the Presidential Palace, protesting the government's decision to drop any discussion of pensions in contract negotiations currently taking place. Teachers are demanding the right to retire with full salaries after 30 years on the job. Presently, 8,000 educators could retire under the pension enhancement. Mediators have proposed that an initial group of 2,000 teachers be granted the pension improvement while a lawyers' commission studies how to extend it to the rest of the teachers. School instructors have rejected the proposal. The government initially supported the compromise, but now claims that current legislation makes it impossible for it to make any

concessions on pension rights.

On June 20, the three unions involved in the teachers strike announced the walkout would continue. The work stoppage is now on its fourth week. The government has declared the strike illegal and has let it be known that it is considering firing the striking teachers.

## São Paulo subway strike

Metro workers in São Paulo stopped work on June 17 to protest a two-month delay in a court-mandated 18.13 percent wage increase. The wage increase has been frozen while transit management appeals the ruling.

São Paulo workers also marched and rallied on the same day to protest Brazil's high rate of unemployment and the government's policies that have kept interest rates at 26 percent, effectively paralyzing economic activity.

## Government workers strike in Paraguay

On June 17 and 18, about 100,000 government workers in Paraguay carried out a national strike over wages. Expressing their solidarity with the strikers, thousands of private school teachers also joined the walkout. The workers are demanding a 35 percent raise. The government, however, insists it cannot afford such an increase while it is financing the country's external debt.

## Tentative agreements in General Electric labor talks

General Electric reached tentative agreements with its two major unions June 16 shortly before the expiration of contracts covering 24,000 workers nationwide. The International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) claimed the agreement maintained workers' current levels of contribution toward health care costs. As in the previous contract, union members will pay for 18 percent of medical expenses over the course of the four-year agreement except for a temporary rise to 19 percent in the second year of the contract.

GE originally wanted workers to assume 30 percent of health care costs. This led to two days of national work stoppages in January. Workers point to the company's profitability in arguing against the attempt to shift increased health care costs onto their shoulders. During 2002, GE earned US\$45,000 in profits per employee in the United States.

According to the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE), the other major GE union, annual wage increases will be set at 3.0 percent in the first year, 2.5 percent in both the second and third years, and 3.0 percent in the last year of the agreement. A worker who presently makes US\$21.70 an hour will see that figure rise to US\$25.22 by the end of the agreement. The extent of GE's plans for job cuts, however, is not clear. Workers will vote on the tentative agreements over the next week.

## California janitor strike settled

Janitors at 90 Sacramento office buildings ended their strike after the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877 and negotiators for the Building Owners and Managers Association reached an agreement June 21, which strikers ratified later that day. The new agreement provides for US\$1.75 in wage increases over the life of a five-year agreement and extends family health care benefits to a majority of the workforce.

The janitors, who make US\$6.95 an hour, wanted to make wages comparable to the US\$9-US\$11 an hour paid to janitors under SEIU contracts in other California cities. Janitors also sought family health benefits as opposed to the previous contract, which was limited to single coverage for the employee.

Local 1877 president Mike Garcia conceded the wages fell short of workers' expectations. "Some people wanted more," he admitted. The strike received support from union and office workers who refused to cross picket lines, while garbage began to pile up as offices went without custodial help.

#### **Northwest Airlines flight attendants leave Teamsters for new union**

The 11,000 flight attendants at Northwest Airlines voted 4,857 to 3,916 to decertify Teamsters Local 2000 and organize under the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA). The vote comes about one year after the Teamsters imposed a trusteeship on Local 2000 and removed the local leadership for not vigorously opposing the PFAA's organizing efforts.

Northwest flight attendants attempted to oust the Teamsters three times previously and had failed. But rank-and-file rancor persisted from the last round of contract talks, during which the Teamsters repeatedly attempted to force through a pro-company contract while the company fired flight attendants and, with government backing, had others arrested.

The PFAA will almost immediately be pressed by Northwest to reopen the present contract, which extends until the middle of 2005, and grant the company US\$134 million in concessions to help shield it from bankruptcy. Last week, CEO Richard Anderson, in outlining an overall concessions package of US\$950 million for all Northwest unions, cited the fact that Northwest can only schedule flight attendants for 80 hours per month, whereas Southwest Airlines can compel its flight attendants to log 104 hours per month.

#### **Labor Board orders Wal-Mart to recognize union at Texas store**

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has ordered the giant retailer Wal-Mart to reopen its meat department and recognize the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union as bargaining representative for meat cutters at its Jacksonville, Texas, store. Seven of the ten workers there voted for the UFCW as their bargaining representative in a 2000 union election.

Wal-Mart responded to the election by closing its meat-cutting departments at all its stores across the United States and simply imported prepackaged or case-ready meat. Meat cutters were reassigned as meat stockers. In a PowerPoint presentation for managers, the company boasted of the tactic, "It's the ultimate union avoidance strategy!"

The Jacksonville meat cutters are the first section of Wal-Mart

employees to successfully unionize. Wal-Mart has also come under criticism for forcing workers to work off the clock without pay and compensating women at lower rates than men.

#### **Postal workers vote to strike**

In the largest turnout in the union's history, postal workers across Canada have delivered a decisive 92 percent strike mandate to the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, (CUPW), which represents 48,000 postal workers across the country.

Voting concluded last week, with 2,500 more members participating than in a similar vote six years ago. Postal workers have been in negotiations for a year, and their last contract expired in January of this year. Among the main issues being fought out are wages, subcontracting and workload. The union has rejected the latest management offer to increase pay by an average of less than 3 percent a year in a five-year contract. Despite the strike mandate, the union says it will not call a strike or introduce pressure tactics until all other avenues have been exhausted.

#### **Workers strike Safeway stores in British Columbia**

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1518 served strike notice last week against the giant retail grocery chain Safeway in the lower mainland of British Columbia. After months of negotiations, the company continues to demand huge concessions from its workers.

Among the concessions Safeway demands are no wage increase in a six-year contract with only lump sum payment of from C\$200 to C\$400; no benefit increase for the majority of workers; no dental benefits for new promotions; and a whole number of other give-backs.

Any agreement reached at Safeway will be looked to as a pattern for its competitors Overwaitea/Save-On stores, which are also in negotiations.

#### **Striking workers block speech by Nova Scotia cabinet minister**

Over 250 group home workers, who have been on strike for more than 10 weeks, blocked streets in downtown Dartmouth last week, preventing Natural Resources Minister Tim Olive from holding a scheduled news conference.

The strikers are employed at provincially funded group homes across Nova Scotia and are fighting for wage increases to bring them in line with workers in similar jobs. Workers are angered by the slow pace of contract talks and their strike has been marked by a number of demonstrations against the government, including occupations of government offices on two occasions.



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