

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 August 2003

Honduran trade unions threaten to strike

On August 14, Honduran trade union leaders announced they will launch a national strike if the government engages in job and wage cuts, as demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Honduran trade unions are grouped in three federations: the Unitary Confederation (CUTH), the Workers Federation (CTH) and the General Labor Confederation (CGT). Their leaders have united in a common strategy against the wage cuts.

CUTH national secretary Israel Salinas says the strike threat has the support of public employees, including 60,000 teachers and public health workers. Fifteen percent of Honduran workers belong to trade unions, including banana and other agricultural workers, textile workers, and transportation and public employees.

The IMF is demanding the government of President Ricardo Maduro balance the budget on the backs of the working class through a 10 percent reduction in public sector jobs, wage reductions for the remaining workers and a two-year wage freeze for teachers and public health workers as a condition for a \$960 million loan.

On August 8, Maduro declared that the IMF ultimatum represented an assault on Honduras's sovereignty and intimated that no agreement would be reached this year.

Medical strike in Uruguay

On August 14, striking public health doctors decided to extend their four-day strike after rejecting a government proposal for a \$17 increase in monthly wages. Doctors are demanding \$68 (2,000 pesos). The following day, the government increased its offer for the lowest-paid workers to 1,000 pesos. The average wage for public health doctors is about 5,000 pesos.

Participating in the strike are 4,200 doctors, together with 15,000 other public health workers. The strike includes the occupation of three hospitals. The government of Jorge Battle has threatened to prosecute the doctors for acts of terrorism against the patients. The strikers countered that the occupied hospitals are being well managed under workers' control. Other hospitals will be occupied if the wage issue goes unresolved.

Chile: First general strike since Pinochet dictatorship

On August 13, Chilean workers carried out the first general strike since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990. Barricades were set up in Santiago and other cities.

The 24-hour strike, which was called by the Unitary Labor Confederation (CUT) and had the support of Chile's Socialist Party, was in protest over anti-labor legislation and income inequality in Chile.

The government of Ricardo Lagos, a Socialist Party member, took a hard stance against the job action. On August 14, Lagos presented criminal charges for alleged violations of the country's anti-terrorist law for three incidents that took place during the strike as a result of clashes between strikers, scabs and the police.

In Santiago, six columns of hundreds of workers marched to the center of town, where the police dispersed them with water cannon and tear gas. More than 300 people were arrested nationwide; one striker was injured by police fire. Violent clashes occurred in the port city of Valparaiso, where 10,000 workers had rallied.

According to CUT president Arturo Martinez, 80 percent of the labor force walked out, a figure disputed by the government.

Colombian public employees protest

On August 12, thousands of state employees protested in Colombia to call attention to the country's social and economic crisis. The demonstrators objected to Colombia's high unemployment rate, continuing layoffs of government workers as a result of structural reforms, and tax increases that hit the working class the hardest. Workers in major Colombian cities left their jobs for a few hours and marched in protest. Despite the peaceful nature of the marches, in Bogotá police violently dispersed the workers with water cannon.

Air traffic controllers denounce attempts to privatize control towers

John Carr, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), charged last week that the Bush administration "is moving aggressively to privatize the air traffic control system, a move that will both jeopardize safety in our skies and stick the taxpayer with a bigger bill."

An amendment to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill will allow the privatization of 69 airport towers in 25 different states, which will lead to the replacement of federal controllers by private contractors. While Bush administration officials point out that the change will only affect 6 percent of all controller jobs, NATCA counters that there are already 200 air traffic control towers under private management across the country. "Clearly, the Bush

administration at the highest levels has a continuing commitment to make air traffic control a commercial activity,” declared NATCA legislative representative Ray Kerr.

Striking California county workers stage civil disobedience

Police in Stockton, Calif., donned riot gear August 14 when a rally of striking San Joaquin county workers gravitated from a local park into the city’s streets, resulting in the blocking of traffic. Using bullhorns, officers threatened arrests unless the crowds dispersed.

Some 6,000 members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 790 are striking against the county’s demand for increased health insurance costs. The action curtailed activity at several county offices. Also affected was the County Sheriff’s department, where 70 deputies walked out in sympathy with striking county workers.

Auto union and parts supplier announce partnership

The United Auto Workers (UAW) and Dana Corporation announced a “partnership agreement” that is believed to exchange increased business for the parts supplier with Ford while allowing the UAW to unionize its nine parts plants.

No details of the pact have been made public, but a company statement declared, “This agreement is the result of lengthy discussions with the UAW during which both parties acknowledged the positive impact our relationship can have in maximizing Dana’s competitive capabilities to successfully address marketplace challenges.”

Ford announced last month it wanted to slash 21,000 jobs at its manufacturing plants over the next four years. The UAW has been pressuring the Big Three automakers to buy parts only from UAW-organized shops. Industry watchers believe Ford’s job cuts, which affect UAW workers making \$26 an hour, will be made up by buying parts from Dana, where the UAW has established a target wage of \$17 an hour. While Dana gains Ford contracts, it agrees to not oppose UAW efforts to organize its workers.

Three Washington state teens die in work accidents

Three 16-year-old boys died in two separate work-related accidents last week. Josh McMahon of Lynnwood, Wash., was crushed to death when a crane fell on top of him at an auto salvage yard that has been cited for other safety violations in recent years.

A second farm-related accident claimed the lives of Tyler Rausch and Cody Forrest while they were working on a farm near Jenkins, Wash. It is believed one youth entered an unvented silo containing cattle feed and was overcome by the fumes and fell into the feed. The second youth, probably seeking to rescue the first, was probably overcome by fumes as well. Both died from asphyxiation.

According to the state’s Department of Labor and Industries, there have been 27,000 reports of teen-age workers suffering injuries on the job over the past 10 years. Randy Loomans, the Washington Labor Council’s education and safety director,

charged, “It would take [Labor and Industries] 300 years with the staff they have now to inspect all the businesses.”

Wal-Mart faces first-ever union ruling

The notoriously anti-union Wal-Mart, the world’s largest retailer, may be compelled to accept the results of a drive to unionize one of its outlets in Manitoba pending the outcome of a court ruling this week that could lead to the first-ever union contract at the company in North America.

In June of this year, 150 workers at the Thompson, Manitoba, store voted on unionization, but the ballot box was sealed following a challenge to the vote brought by Wal-Mart. United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW) is the organizing union that is still embroiled in contract negotiations for the Jacksonville, Texas, Wal-Mart outlet where workers voted three years ago to join the union. That move was stalled by the company tactic of changing job descriptions. In Manitoba, the company has again thrown various legal obstacles to prevent the ballot count.

The UFCW says it is confident that if the ballots are counted they will favor unionization, noting that more than 40 percent of employees at the store signed union certification cards earlier in the year.

Nova Scotia shelter workers forced to strike

Ten unionized workers at a women’s shelter in Amherst, Nova Scotia, walked off the job last week after management cancelled the current contract and stated that it would refuse to negotiate a new agreement. The workers had voted to go on strike August 28, but the board of directors at the shelter responded with the unprecedented move and arbitrarily declared their own conditions of employment.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and operate a crisis hot line, as well as provide counseling to battered women. Management justified its actions by citing budget cuts handed down by the provincial Conservative government.

Montreal facing fall bus strike

Montreal could be hit with a bus strike some time in late September as negotiations with the city’s essential service council continued last week to determine what service would be provided in the event of a strike. Negotiations between the union representing bus drivers and the city broke down June 20 when the head of the Montreal Transit Corporation threatened to halt weekend subway service and cut overnight buses.

A strike vote will be held in the middle of September, and workers could walk out immediately. Workers are seeking pay raises of 18 percent as well as job security.



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