

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 September 2003

Strikes continue in Uruguay

Government workers walked off the job September 4 in support of the four-week-old strike by 14,000 public health workers and 4,200 doctors. The strike was organized by the 200,000-strong Confederation of Government Employees (COFE).

Barring a settlement with the health workers, the central federation of trade unions (PIT-CNT) is threatening to launch a 24- or 48-hour general strike. The workers are demanding a US\$68 monthly wage increase.

At last report, the Batlle government was close to a settlement. A government spokesman expressed optimism that a contract would be signed on September 8.

During the strike, 10 hospitals were taken over by their employees; police forces evicted the workers from three of them, though the government now says it will not evict any more workers for a week.

Peruvian teachers threaten to strike

The Peruvian teachers union announced that public school teachers would walk off their jobs September 17 to protest government opposition to wage increases in 2004. The announcement follows a one-month strike four months ago that was widely supported by the Peruvian working class. As a result of the strike the government of Alejandro Toledo had promised to double teachers' salaries by 2006. However, the government has yet to appropriate sufficient funds in next year's budget to begin fulfilling its promise.

Puerto Rican hotel workers near strike

Negotiations between the Gastronomical Union (UG) and the management of Wyndham Condado Plaza (WCP) Hotel and Casino are at a standstill, increasing the likelihood of a strike. The WCP is a luxury beachfront hotel in the center of San Juan's tourist area. Were the 476 workers to walk out, they would also put up picket lines around Wyndham's other major hotels on the island.

Management refuses to increase wages and benefits and is instead offering bonuses to selected workers. The union is demanding graduated wage increases that would bring the lower paid workers up to par with higher paid ones.

Mexican flight attendants strike

On September 1 flight attendants employed by Mexican domestic airline *Aeromar* staged a one-day strike over wages. The largely female workers decided to walk out because *Aeromar* rejected their wage demands.

A union spokesperson declared that the flight attendants initially had demanded a 15 percent wage increase, eventually dropping their demand to 5 percent (roughly the rate of inflation). The strike forced *Aeromar* to cancel 63 flights.

Aeromar strike ended Tuesday after pesos (US\$600). The Flight Attendants Union (ASSA) will next negotiate the contract for *Mexicana de Aviacion*, whose 1,400 flight attendants are also demanding a 15 percent wage increase. *Mexicana* flight attendants have set September 15 as their strike deadline.

Yale walkout continues

More than 2,500 clerical and maintenance workers are continuing their strike that began August 27 against Yale University for better pension benefits, wages and guaranteed job security. The two major bargaining units are Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant International Union. Local 34 represents about 2,800 clerical workers and technical workers, including lab technicians and library workers. Local 35 represents about 1,100 service and maintenance workers, including those who prepare and serve food for the students, as well as performing various duties to maintain the school.

In support of the strike, about 160 professors who teach more than 5,000 students are holding their classes off campus. Chanting strikers with drums, bullhorns and placards are regularly picketing the campus grounds. One night they picketed in front of Yale President Richard Levin's home to protest the opening of a hall that was renovated with nonunion labor.

A large number of teachers have signed a letter calling on Yale to end the conflict by accepting binding arbitration. Union leaders have stated they are willing to end the strike and allow all their demands to be decided by an outside party. Yale has rejected this proposal. Thus far, there have been no reports of progress in the negotiations between the two sides.

At the same time, leaders of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization, who are trying to unionize about 2,100 graduate students, have established a fact-finding committee to investigate their charges that some Yale professors have engaged in an illegal intimidation of graduate students in order to prevent them from establishing a union. The union was rejected last April by a narrow vote. Yale University officials have denied the charges.

Long Island University faculty strikes

Teachers went on strike September 5 against the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. The union, the Long Island University Faculty Federation, voted 160 to 5 to reject the university's last offer. The contract for 250 full-time and 300 part-time teachers expired August 31.

The major issues in the contract dispute are health care costs and wages. The union says the university's offer would lead to faculty members paying substantially more for their medical benefits. The union membership also has rejected the school's offer of a 2

percent wage increase for the first year of a three-year contract. About 11,000 students are enrolled on the campus.

Long Island school bus drivers walk out

About 200 school bus drivers and monitors, members of Transport Workers Union Local 252, went on strike September 3 against Laidlaw International in eastern Long Island. The walkout affects about 12,000 students. The membership of Transport Workers Union Local 252 have complained that the bus company wants to take away certain contractual rights for their most senior drivers. Many of the workers picketing the depot are themselves parents of children who have had to find alternate means to get to school.

Iowa tannery workers reject company offer, strike continues

Tannery workers at Eagle Ottawa in Waterloo, Iowa voted down the company's most recent offer as the strike by 204 members of Local 7-827 of the Paper Allied-Industrial Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) enters its seventh week. Eagle Ottawa processes raw hides for leather upholstery for GM and Toyota. Workers rejected a 50 cent raise over the life of a three-year agreement along with the company's demand for 20-30 percent increases in employee contributions for health insurance coverage.

Workers point out that deductibles and other health care costs have already doubled since the last contract of 2000. Waterloo workers make \$12.91 an hour compared to \$19 to \$20 an hour paid to workers at the company's older plant in Grand Haven, Michigan. Workers are also seeking language that would allow time off. It is not uncommon for workers to log 12 hours a day, seven days a week, over extended periods of time.

Eagle Ottawa indicated before the vote they will begin hiring strikebreakers should PACE members vote down their "last" offer. "Eagle Ottawa continues to encourage its striking employees to return to work and will begin hiring replacements as necessary in order to fully staff the plant," read a prepared statement. "Additionally, Eagle Ottawa has drawn on its other tanneries located worldwide to supplement Waterloo production. By using these combined resources and executing to the company's contingency plan, Eagle Ottawa will continue to meet forecasted customer demand."

Machinists threaten strike against US Airways over outsourcing

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) has said it will call machinists at US Airways' Pittsburgh facility out on strike if the company moves ahead with a plan to outsource the heavy maintenance work for its Airbus fleet. IAM Local 1976 President Frank Schifano said such a move would be a major violation of its contract. "That work is exclusively ours and we intend to do that work in-house," he declared.

US Airways claims the proposal does not violate the contract, nor will it affect staffing levels in Pittsburgh. Some 1,900 machinists work at the Pittsburgh airport. Should they strike, the remaining 2,600 IAM mechanics at other US Airways facilities will strike in sympathy, according to the union.

US Airways wants to settle the dispute before an arbitrator, but the IAM has declined to go to court and ask for federal intervention. US Airways is still attempting to restore profitability following Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Teamsters hotel strike triggers lockout

Front desk and clerical workers, concierges and other hotel staff struck San Francisco's Holiday Inn Golden Gateway and the Sheraton at Fisherman's Wharf September 4 after contract talks between Teamsters Local 856 and the San Francisco Hotel Association broke down. The association reacted to the strike by locking out workers at 14 other association member hotels.

A spokesman for the hotel association called its 13.5 percent wage hike offer "huge numbers in this economy." When talks broke down the two sides were apparently only 10 cents apart on wages. The major issue from the standpoint of the Teamsters bureaucracy is hotel management's attempt to get control of the health and welfare trust fund, presently controlled by the union. According to Local 856 business representative Julie Wall, the association's last offer "would have accomplished the money grab and would have provided peanuts in wages."

Shelter workers picket Nova Scotia legislature

Striking workers from a women's shelter in Amherst, Nova Scotia picketed the provincial legislature on September 4, the legislature's first day of operations since last month's election. Workers handed out a leaflet that asked, "Would John Hamm still be premier if he had to raise his salary through bake sales?"—a reference to the fact that women's shelters are not fully funded by the province and rely on bake sales and other such fundraisers in order to operate.

The shelter workers have been on strike since August 11. The shelter's board of directors has refused a wage increase, is demanding that they work 12-hour shifts and is trying to reduce long-term disability payments and maternity benefits. The shelter workers are represented by Local 4326 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Workers strike Newfoundland helicopter plant

As of midnight September 3, 100 workers at CHC Helicopters in Gander, Newfoundland were on strike. They are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers and are striking for a first contract. The workers are demanding wage increases and are resisting management attempts to reduce sick leave from 10 days to 5 days. The company has claimed it cannot meet the workers' demands because it is losing money.

Strike at Wadena School Division

Eighty support workers at the Wadena School Division in Saskatchewan, who have been engaged in rotating strikes since April, have been on strike since August 25. The workers, represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3078, are demanding wage increases, more full-time work, optical and dental benefits, and holiday and in-service training wages.

The workers have been without a contract since December 31, 2000. The school division has employed scabs to replace the striking workers.



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