

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 September 2003

Panamanian public employees demand raise in minimum wage

Panamanian government workers are demanding the same raise in minimum wages obtained by private sector employees. A month ago, President Mireya Moscoso decreed a 6 percent raise for all 110,000 private-sector workers, exempting public employees. The raise lifted the minimum wage to US\$268 per month, Latin America's highest.

About one quarter of the public workers earn US\$264 or less a month. Union leaders point out that to live decently in Panama a working class family requires US\$700.

One year since struggle against privatizations in El Salvador

To mark the first anniversary of the resistance against the Francisco Flores government's project to privatize health care, 2,000 doctors and their supporters marched through San Salvador on September 20.

On September 18, 2002, public health workers and doctors initiated a strike to block plans to privatize the country's state-run health system. The strike lasted nine months and ended with an agreement the government never fully implemented. In violation of the agreement, 33 fired strikers were never rehired.

Mexican union chiefs work to crush teachers' dissent

On September 11, the secretary of the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) accused the Executive Committee of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) of attempting to destabilize Section 22, the Oaxaca state division of the SNTE.

The CNTE is a rank-and-file organization of teachers formed in 1979 to combat a corrupt bureaucracy and organize for democratic control of the SNTE. The CNTE has had broad popular support among members of Section 22 since its creation.

On September 10, violent protesters attacked the secretary of Section 22 and surrounded its union hall. The state director of the teachers' union in Oaxaca claimed that the attack on the union hall was organized by the national leaders to create the illusion of division within the section in an attempt to destabilize its activities.

The SNTE bureaucrats have been largely living off funds embezzled from mandatory union dues deducted from teachers' salaries. Several have been implicated in the wave of teacher assassinations in Mexico over the last two decades.

Section 22 has fought for increased funding for public education and fair wages for teachers. It has organized large-scale protests against recent government attempts to undermine Mexico's public education system through privatization.

The director of Section 22, Alejandro Leal Díaz, considers the attack on the union hall to be aggression against the movement for democratic control of their union. It is the latest move by the national union leaders in a "dirty war" to stifle dissent among the teachers. Since the foundation of the CNTE, dissident teachers have been the targets of assassination, with at least 200 being killed or disappearing since 1981. Half of these teachers came from the mostly indigenous state of Oaxaca.

Doctors strike in Santo Domingo

More than 3,500 public health doctors went on strike on September 18 in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. The dispute is over wages. The 24-hour strike was organized by the Dominican Doctors Association (CMD) and affected 20 clinics.

The CMD is also demanding an end to delayed paychecks as well as improved working conditions in hospitals and clinics. It has warned that if its members' demands are not properly addressed, there will be a national hospital strike.

Teachers strike in Peru

On September 17, Peruvian teachers walked out, denouncing the Toledo government's refusal to carry out the terms of a wage agreement that settled a month-long strike in June. At that time, the government agreed to raise teachers' wages to US\$200 a month. However, next year's budget does not appropriate enough funds to carry out that part of the contract.

Peru's General Workers' Confederation (CGTP) organized rallies in support of the teachers and demanded a change in government policy to create jobs, protect agriculture and expand democratic rights.

Amtrak unions threaten shutdown over lack of funding

Unions representing 8,000 engineers and mechanics for Amtrak said their members would conduct a one-day strike October 3 to protest the chronic underfunding of the nation's rail system. "Our members are fed up with trying to duct tape the railroad together so it can run," said Charles Money Penny, director for the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

Amtrak president David Gunn has requested US\$1.8 billion for the new fiscal year, starting October 1. A Senate appropriations committee has proposed US\$1.34 billion, while the House of Representatives has approved US\$900 million, half of Amtrak's request. The strategy of the Bush administration is to ultimately dismantle Amtrak and privatize some of its routes.

In Washington, D.C., about 100 Amtrak workers rallied in front of Union Station to draw attention to Amtrak's plight. Gene Anirina, a building and bridges foreman, told the Associated Press that some of the rail infrastructure is in decay and predates World War II. "We supply the rest of the world to fix their infrastructure, usually after we blow it up. It bothers me big time."

Walkout ends at Yale University

Yale University achieved a settlement on September 18 with Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant International Union, which had been on strike since August 27. The accord—an eight-year contract, as demanded by Yale—provides modest wage and pension increases for the nearly 4,000 clerical, technical, maintenance and dining workers. Yale also obtained a long-sought-after productivity clause the unions had originally opposed.

The accord is retroactive to January 2002, when the old contract expired, and provides for wage hikes of 4 to 5 percent each year for Local 34 and 3 to 4 percent for Local 35—salary increases that are not very different from Yale's original offer. According to the university,

under the old contract, service and technical workers earned an average of about US\$30,000 per year and clerical workers earned an average of about US\$33,000 per year.

With almost a thousand workers planning to retire in the next six years, the pension issue in particular was the most contentious. The union had originally complained that its current pension benefits were so low that many retirees were living in poverty. This will continue under the new contract. A typical worker making US\$30,000 a year would still receive only US\$13,500 a year if he retired after 30 years.

Under the negotiated settlement, Yale will have the right to give its workers US\$500 bonuses for superior productivity. Such schemes have always been used to obtain greater work for less remuneration, while at the same time weakening worker solidarity.

The deal has been cited as setting a precedent for agreements on university campuses across the US. At the same time, the 140 dietary workers in Local 1199 at Yale-New Haven Hospital who were also on strike rejected the hospital's contract offer, but with the Yale walkout over, they decided to return to work.

Rail union officials charged with racketeering

Federal prosecutors charged four officials of the United Transportation Union (UTU) with racketeering, mail fraud and wire fraud on September 16 for their alleged involvement in a scheme whereby they accepted bribes from attorneys who sought lucrative legal work with the union. Byron Boyd, current president of the UTU, and former president Charles Little were among those named in the charges.

A federal investigation, which began in 1999 in Houston, Texas, says the four officials received at least US\$477,000 in cash in an operation that dates back to 1995. The officials took the cash and other favors from attorneys who were eager to get on the union's "Designated Legal Counsel" list. If convicted, each official could face up to 20 years in prison on racketeering charges and an additional 10 years for each fraud charge. Three of the four officials pleaded not guilty. The lawyer for a fourth, Ralph Dennis, who was director of insurance for the union until last July, says his client plans to change his plea from guilty to not guilty.

Southwest Airlines attendants hold protests over contract impasse

Flight attendants for Southwest Airlines handed out peanuts to customers and carried signs saying "working for free is just plane nuts" in demonstrations at seven airports across the United States, including Baltimore, Dallas and Chicago. The demonstrations came after Southwest negotiators declared an impasse following 16 months of contract talks and asked for federal mediation.

Southwest began bargaining by seeking to increase the workday from 10 hours to 13 hours, but has now withdrawn that offer. The two sides are now deadlocked over wage issues. Southwest, one of the few profitable carriers, pays its flight attendants 20 to 30 percent less than those of other carriers—including bankrupt carriers.

Machinists union suspends union officials at Lockheed plant

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) suspended 16 unnamed union officials at Lockheed Martin's Marietta, Ga., plant on grounds they overcharged or failed to account for more than US\$150,000. The IAM did not place the local in trusteeship, but instead appointed temporary officers until an election in November can replace those removed from office.

IAM president Thomas Buffenbarger outlined charges in a letter to Local 709, listing officers' offenses, such as charging the local for first-class airline tickets when they had actually flown in coach,

failing to account for expenses, or falsely inflating them.

Local 709 represents 2,700 workers at Lockheed's largest plant where they construct the F/A-22 Raptor fighter and the C-130 Hercules transport plane for the military. The IAM bureaucracy has overseen substantial job reductions at Lockheed. Last year, workers struck for six weeks against the defense contractor.

Rol-Land Farms workers join union

Workers at the Rol-Land Farms mushroom factory in southern Ontario voted 132-45 in favor of certifying the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) as their bargaining agent. Although the vote took place in early July, legal hurdles had delayed the counting of the ballots. On September 17, the Ontario Superior Court was asked by the company to throw out the union vote, citing as justification the Tories' euphemistically named "Agricultural Employees Protection Act." The act denies farm workers the right to bargain collectively (legislation by the preceding New Democratic Party government gave farm workers the right to bargain collectively but denied them the right to strike). The court rejected this argument, but future legal challenges are expected.

Big concessions in Comox health workers' settlement

Four hundred hospital workers in Comox, B.C. (on Vancouver Island) voted 65 percent in favor of ratifying a concession-laden settlement with their employer, St. Joseph's Hospital. The settlement, negotiated by the Hospital Employee's Union, immediately reduces the wages of maintenance workers by C\$1.92 per hour. Direct care workers will see an immediate reduction of 20 cents per hour, and all other hospital workers will lose 40 cents per hour. In addition, workers will have to pay back wage equity adjustments made earlier in the year, will lose three days of vacation, and will have to work a longer workweek.

In exchange for these concessions, the employer has signed a memorandum of agreement stating that wages (for the *remaining* employees!) will be reinstated at their present levels if any jobs are contracted out.

BC forest workers vote to strike

Twelve-thousand workers in British Columbia's forest industry recently voted by a margin of 89 percent to strike against company demands that the present collective agreements be extended as is. The strike mandate comes shortly on the heels of calls by the CEOs of Weyerhaeuser, TimberWest and Interfor for massive restructuring of the forestry industry. The workers' main demands are for wage increases, pension improvements and protection against subcontracting.



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