

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 October 2003

Demonstrations in Honduras

On October 14 thousands of demonstrators blocked streets in Tegucigalpa and six other cities across Honduras, demanding the government reject a draft agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Teachers and public health workers, including doctors and nurses, joined the protest, conducting a 24-hour strike. In Tegucigalpa the protesters burned tires and barricaded the roads into the city.

The Popular Block (BP) and the Party of Democratic Unity (PUD) organized the marches, rallies and strikes. The BP is a coalition of 25 organizations that includes trade unions. The government signed a deal with the IMF in 2001 that limited government spending and is now expected to sign a three-year agreement.

Per capita income in Honduras is less than \$3,000 a year. The country is largely agricultural and is in the midst of a deep economic slump, due to the collapse of world prices for its main exports—coffee, bananas and shrimp—and due to the lingering effects of the destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. These conditions have made it impossible for Honduras to service its debt to international agencies and banks.

Thousands protest unemployment in Buenos Aires

On October 17, 10 organizations of unemployed workers came together to protest the persistently high jobless rate in Argentina. The marchers blocked streets in various sections of downtown. The biggest rally took place in front of the Bolivian embassy, where thousands showed solidarity with the struggle of the Bolivian masses. Other groups occupied train stations to demand free train passes for the unemployed, while others rallied in front of the federal courts demanding freedom for political prisoners Fernando Vaca Narvaja and Roberto Perdía. Early in the afternoon there were also protests outside the labor ministry to demand more relief for the unemployed.

Argentina is recovering from its worst economic crisis in history. Growth this quarter is expected to be at an annual rate of about 5 percent, but unemployment remains high and about 60 percent of the population have incomes below the poverty line.

Haiti protests demand ouster of President Aristide

For the past four weeks, protests marches and strikes have

rocked Haiti demanding an end to the regime of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. On October 16 protesters in the city of Gonaïves exchanged fire with the police and one demonstrator was shot in the head. In the last three weeks eight protesters have been killed and 29 have been wounded. On October 13 and 14 thousands marched in the city of St. Marc, while strikes were taking place in Cap-Haitien and marches and barricades of burning tires shut down activity in Gonaïves. Similar demonstrations took place on October 10 in Port Au Prince, which also included unemployed demanding jobs.

Haiti has a population of 3.8 million and is the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere. Half of its people suffer from chronic hunger. Seventy percent of the labor force is unemployed and the minimum wage of US\$1.70 a day is widely ignored, with some workers earning as little as \$0.60. The so-called reformer Aristide, who came to power with the aid of the United States, is now widely reviled as a corrupt tool of the wealthy.

Strike/lockout of supermarket workers continues in St Louis

Grocery companies in St. Louis, Missouri took out a full-page ad in the Sunday edition of the city's major daily newspaper citing the support by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 655 president for the pro-company tentative agreement earlier rejected by 10,000 striking and locked-out rank-and-file workers.

The ad in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reprinted part of a September 15 letter from Local 655 President Robert Kelley, which said, "I fully endorse this proposal and recommend that you vote to ratify this contract." It concluded with a company rejoinder, "We couldn't have said it better ourselves."

Workers at grocery chains Schnuck Markets, Dierbergs Markets and Shop 'n Save Warehouse Foods voted down the tentative agreement by a two-thirds margin, forcing Kelley to reverse his earlier support for the pact and call a strike. However he limited the walkout to one chain, Schnuck Markets. Dierbergs and Shop 'n Save responded by locking out their workers.

The UFCW continues to isolate the strike, as St. Louis grocery workers on the Illinois side of the river remain on

the job.

Arizona grocery workers face strike deadline

UFCW Local 99, which represents 14,000 workers statewide at Safeway and Fry's supermarkets in Arizona, faces an October 25 strike deadline. Among other concessions, the company wants the right to reduce the minimum number of working hours, presently set at 20 per week. A minimum of 20 hours is needed for workers to qualify for health care benefits. The grocery chains are expected to use a lower weekly work standard to disqualify workers from the program.

No progress in court-imposed negotiations in Washington teachers strike

Four days of court-ordered negotiations in the strike by 650 Washington state teachers continued through the weekend with no sign of an agreement. Last week a county superior court judge imposed negotiations on the Marysville Education Association and officials of the school district. If the two sides are unable to come to an agreement, they will meet again with Judge Linda Krese, who is considering an imposing a back-to-work order.

A spokeswoman for the school district continued to stonewall the talks, declaring, "Unfortunately we have no more money." Rich Wood of the Washington Education Association charged the school district with "just putting in their time" at the bargaining table while waiting for the judge to intervene against teachers.

The recent court action comes on the heels of Governor Gary Locke's call on the school board to reopen the school without settling the contract dispute and Democratic State Rep. Hans Dunshee's plan to introduce a bill to impose binding arbitration. Marysville teachers are seeking an 11 percent raise over three years while the school board is demanding a salary freeze.

Tensions in Illinois nursing home strike

The Illinois deputy state's attorney has withdrawn his decision to obtain a court order against picketing by nursing home workers on strike against Winnebago County after union officials said there would be no more picket line incidents. Last week 340 workers voted to strike River Bluff Nursing home, citing insufficient wage increases. The county has offered annual raises of 3 percent and 2 percent during the course of a two-year contract. The union is seeking 3 percent per year and an increase in starting wages from \$7.25 an hour to \$8.

Nursing home administrators are bringing in temporary nurses, accused by strikers of speeding through picket lines and using obscene gestures towards pickets.

New Brunswick civil servants expand job action

Striking New Brunswick civil servants, including custodians and cooks at community colleges, corrections

officers and human services counselors, instituted roving picket lines and protests outside the constituency offices of Members of Legislative Assembly in the past week. Previously their job action had been restricted to volunteering at community centers and nursing homes. The strike has forced the closure of many community colleges.

The workers—half of whom are designated essential services and denied the right to strike—have been without a contract since December 2002 and have been on strike since October 3, 2003. Their main demands are for a wage increase and for wage parity with other jurisdictions. The government's last offer was for a 9.62 percent wage increase over four years. The government has refused to negotiate with the union and has employed replacement workers in human services.

Safeway workers ratify contract

Workers at 49 outlets of supermarket chain Safeway across British Columbia's lower mainland ratified the agreement reached in September between the United Food and Commercial Workers and their employer.

The 4,700 workers, who voted 98 percent in favor of strike action last April, were seeking the elimination of wage disparities within the unionized workforce. The new five-year collective agreement maintains the status quo in this regard—according to which workers at the same outlets are split between two locals, with some making as little as \$8.50 per hour, while others earn \$21 per hour.

Talks fail at Autumn House Shelter

The first talks in seven weeks failed to produce a settlement in the spirited strike waged by 10 workers at Nova Scotia's Autumn House Women's Shelter. The two sides met for the only time since August 26, but the employer continued to demand major concessions around the long-term disability plan and continued to demand that employees work 12-hour shifts.

The workers, represented by CUPE Local 4326, have been on strike since August 11.



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