

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 August 2004

Latin America

Airport strike in Bolivia

Bolivian airports were paralyzed on July 30 by a strike of airport workers. The employees are demanding that the legislature approve a draft air travel law that they consider vital. The 12-hour strike affected civilian flights at 37 airports.

The Union of Airport Workers (SAASANA) called the strike after the Bolivian congress stalled on legislation that would modernize air travel.

According to union officials, unless the airports install modern equipment, they will begin losing international accreditation, possibly forcing international flights to bypass Bolivia altogether.

The legislation had been postponed for nine months.

The immediate result of the strike was the resignation of the chief of civilian air travel in that country, Eduardo Scott. The workers suspended their walkout shortly after Scott resigned.

Massive protest against privatizations in Ecuador

On July 29 about 10,000 protesters from all over Latin America marched in Quito to protest the policies of privatizations. Protesters, including trade unionists, retirees and students, chanted: "We are opposed to being a US colony!" and "Transnational companies out of the country!" Some of the marchers carried a giant flag of Venezuela to show their rejection of US intervention in Venezuelan politics.

Malvinas veterans demand their rights

Veterans of the 1982 Malvinas War between Argentina and Great Britain have set up tents in Plaza de Mayo, across from Argentina's government house, in an attempt to get the government of Nestor Kirchner to recognize their rights to decent pensions and medical care. Pensions for veterans were not provided until 1991.

Among veterans the unemployment rate is 50 percent, almost three times the national rate. The suicide rate among veterans is also very high. Since the war ended

over 265 former soldiers have killed themselves.

Day of protest in Chile

The Chilean labor federation (CUT) carried out a day of protest in Santiago in opposition to draft labor legislation that, in the guise of "making the labor market more flexible," would make it easier to sack workers. Three thousand workers rallied and set up barricades in Santiago neighborhoods and battled the police. Some 200 were arrested and 27 were wounded.

The government of Ricardo Lagos claims that, if they find it easier to lay off workers,, employers will have an incentive to hire more workers. Despite a boom in cooper exports, unemployment in Chile is rising. The April-June unemployment rate is 9.6 percent, up from 9.1 percent for the previous trimester.

Government workers protest in Costa Rica

Government employees walked off their jobs on July 29 in Costa Rica to protest an inadequate wage offer by the government. Last week government authorities raised their wage offer from 3.5 percent to 4 percent. The unions that represent 146,000 government workers are demanding 10 percent. That wage would barely keep up with this year's rise in the cost of living, which the Central Bank predicts will top 11 percent this year.

The government of President Abel Pacheco has promised to "scrape the bottom of the pan" and come up with an improved offer this week.

Mexican workers defend their pension rights

The bureaucracy of the National Union of Social Security Employees (SNTSS) is proposing "immediate mass picketing" that would disrupt traffic in the main avenues in Mexico City, to press the Senate not to approve draft pension legislation that has already been approved by the House of Deputies.

The decision was made on Friday July 30, in the wake of a mass rally that brought together thousands of workers before the legislative palace of San Lazaro.

The SNTSS bureaucracy is split on the issue, however. The SNTSS General Secretary called for

further negotiations, for the lobbying of individual legislators and for appeals to the courts. Another section of the bureaucracy has called for “radical measures,” which include the closure of Mexico’s stock exchange.

At the rally, thousands of workers demanded that the SNTSS call an immediate strike.

Last week the SNTSS bureaucracy presented a pension plan that would protect the rights of existing workers but raise contributions and the age of retirement and lower pension amounts for new workers. The bureaucracy is believed to be working closely with President Vicente Fox to sell out the membership’s pension rights.

United States

San Diego Coca Cola strike continues

Negotiators for the Coca-Cola Bottling Company in San Diego, California and the Teamsters union were to resume talks over the weekend in an effort to settle the strike by some 500 workers.

On the previous weekend, the leadership of Teamsters Local 683 endorsed a tentative settlement of the strike under which the company backed off its initial demands for concessions and agreed to lower co-payments and weekly premiums on health care coverage while lengthening the contract from three years to five years. But workers overwhelmingly rejected the proposal by a 298-12 margin.

The rejected tentative agreement would have set weekly premiums at the same level for both families and individuals, starting at \$9.50 in the first year and topping out at \$27 in the fifth year.

The current rate is \$4 per week for individuals and \$7.50 for families. Co-payments under the proposal would have been hiked to \$10 for the first three years of the agreement and \$20 after that. The current rate is between zero and \$5 for office visits.

Canada

Quebec dairy strike ends

One hundred ninety-six striking workers at Agropur’s cheese and butter factories in Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil and Plessisville, Quebec ratified a new contract July 28, ending a strike that began on April 6.

At Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, the 136 workers voted 92 percent in favor of the contract, but in Plessisville only 56 percent of the workers approved the employer’s offer. The workers are members of the

Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD). The new collective agreement gives employees a 2.3 percent salary increase a year over seven years.

Labrador City residents rally in support of striking steelworkers

On July 28 about 1,000 residents of Labrador City, Newfoundland took to the streets in support of 1,250 striking steelworkers at Iron Ore Company of Canada (IOC) and 300 steelworkers at Wabush Mines. The workers, who are members of United Steelworkers of America, went on strike July 5 at Wabush Mines and July 19 at IOC over the issues of seniority and contracting out.



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