

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 August 2004

Latin America

Army kills three Colombian union leaders

On August 5 the army killed three union leaders who were meeting with alleged members of the People's Liberation Army (ELN). Union sources denounced the killings as part of a four-year-long campaign against the labor movement, which has already resulted in the death of 574 union members. The killing took place in the Department of Arauca, in northern Colombia. The ELN is the second largest guerrilla group in Colombia.

The army version is that the three men—Jorge Prieto, Leonel Goyeneche and Héctor Martínez—were armed with guns and dynamite and that there were warrants out for their arrest.

Prieto was the Arauca President of the National Association of Hospital Employees (ANTHOC); Goyeneche was the regional treasurer of the Unified Workers Central (CUT) de la Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT); and Martínez led an association of small farmers.

Two other union officials were arrested at the scene—Samuel Morales, the CUT president for Arauca and Raquel Castro, a leader of the teacher's union.

The Colombian unions and human rights organizations described the killings as an “extra-judicial execution.” They rejected the government's version of the event and pointed out that there is a military plot against the union movement and the left.

In Bogota one day before the killings, the CUT had informed the government of a conspiracy involving paramilitary squads to murder Arauca union activists. The CUT had also presented the same information to the International Labor Organization.

In 2002, Goyeneche and Martínez were arrested and held for 14 months. They were eventually cleared by the courts of any connection with the ELN. Furthermore, there was no arrest warrant against Prieto. The arrest order against Morales was issued only after he complained publicly of harassment by local authorities.

Central Bank workers strike in Brazil

On August 2nd 4,600 Central bank workers carried out a 24-hour strike in Brazil. The strikers are members of the National Union of Central Bank Employees (SINAL). At issue is the workers' rejection of a government wage offer postponing a step raise from November 2004 until December 2005. “In reality this means a raise around January 2006, which is not acceptable to us,” declared Sérgio Belsito, President of

SINAL.

By the end of the week, the bank had agreed to move the raise up to October 2005. The bank is proposing a 22 percent raise in unequal steps. This means that workers will only receive a four percent raise this year and have to wait for the bulk of the money until next October.

On August 6th workers' assemblies rejected this second offer and voted to strike this week, beginning on August 8th, for an indefinite period.

Football strike in Uruguay

The strike by first and second division players in Uruguay is now on its seventh week and there are signs that a settlement is near. The main stumbling block is the reticence of rich clubs to subsidize the wage bill of the poorer clubs until the end of this year. According to the football players' union, such an arrangement would keep Second Division teams from getting behind on the players' salaries.

The strike originally began as a protest over long delays in the payment of players' wages at Second Division clubs.

If the economically strong clubs—mostly in the First Division—were to agree to this temporary patch, the players have declared their intention to end the strike, while negotiations continue to reach a permanent solution.

Such a solution would involve restructuring the leagues and reducing the number of teams (there are currently 18 first and second division teams).

Violent protest by Bolivian tin miners

Scores of tin miners who have occupied their mine for three months rallied at the government-owned mine company headquarters in La Paz on August 4, demanding the release of some of their jailed comrades.

During the protest, the front door of the building was blown open with dynamite. Following the incident, the miners battled police. The latter used tear gas to disperse the protest.

Mexican electric utility workers union denounces pension changes

On August 6 the Mexican Electricians Union (SME) warned the administration of Vicente Fox that it will not permit any changes to its pensions. According to an SME spokesperson, under no conditions would the union accept “meddling by the legislature in our contract.”

Last Wednesday, the Mexican Congress modified the pension rights of Public Health employees, shattering their contractual agreements on pensions. Under the new agreement, new

entrants to the system will be forced to pay more for their pension and health benefits, retire at a later date and receive less money when they do retire.

The SME has vowed a “partial strike” against any attacks on their members’ pensions, as well as other unspecified “profoundly oppositional” measures.

An official of the Fox government, Eduardo Sojo, coordinator of the federal Office of Public Policies, declared that the changes in the public health employee pensions were only a beginning and that the government will need to modify the pensions for oil workers, electrical utility workers and other employees of publicly-owned companies.

Both the SME and the public health workers union (SNTSS) will participate in a “defense of sovereignty” demonstration in Mexico City on Monday August 9. The purpose of the protest will be to denounce labor-liberalization measures and privatization measures that are being proposed for Mexico by the World Bank.

United States

Mount Clemens, Michigan nurses strike

Over five hundred registered nurses walked out on strike at Mount Clemens General Hospital Monday morning, August 9, after contract talks deadlocked over wages, paid time off, health care, pensions and staffing levels. On the eve of the strike MCGH management brought in replacements from US Nursing Corp, which has supplied strikebreakers during many labor disputes throughout the US.

“We’re profoundly disappointed that the hospital has chosen to disregard the pleas of 500-plus nurses to adequately staff our hospital,” Sandra Sulflow, vice president of the RN Staff Council of the Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 40, told the *Detroit Free Press*. “The proposals ... were so modest ... that it is hard for the nurses not to construe that administrative ego trumped fiscal responsibility.”

The nurses, who have been without a contract for five months, voted on July 19 to authorize a strike. Negotiations are set to resume Thursday, August 12. Last month, the U.S. Department of Labor ordered the hospital to repay \$907,247 in back wages to 2,083 employees. It said the hospital wrongly required employees to work a full 15 minutes extra to qualify for overtime.

Union officials call off threatened strike at Seattle-area grocers

Officials from the United Food and Commercial and Teamsters union reached a tentative agreement August 8 to avert a strike by an estimated 1,400 workers in the Seattle area. The deal with Safeway, Albertsons, and Kroger-owned QFC and Fred Meyer stores came three months after the expiration of the current contract.

Although neither side has made public the terms of the agreement, the union had already indicated its willingness to concede to management’s demands for workers to pay larger out-of-pocket health care costs and other concessions.

Management was also seeking a two-tier wage structure for new employees.

The agreement covers UFCW Locals 44, 81, 381 and 1105, as well as Teamsters Local 38. Another 11,000 grocery employees in Western Washington are covered by contracts that will expire later this year. Earlier this year, Southern California grocery workers waged a 4/12 month strike against many of the same employers. The struggle was isolated by the UFCW bureaucracy and management successfully imposed many of its major concession demands.

BellSouth vote to strike

Members Communications Workers of America last week voted by a 97 percent margin to authorize strike action over job security and management demands that they pay for health care costs. CWA officials say they could call a strike of 44,000 employees in nine southern states, including North and South Carolina, by next weekend if management does not retreat from some of its demands.

Canada

Workers at Quèbec Wal-Mart to form union

One hundred seventy workers at the Wal-Mart outlet in Jonquière, Quèbec will be the first to form a union that includes the workers of an entire outlet. A majority of workers at the Jonquière store had signed cards to join the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), compelling the Quèbec Labour Relations Commission to certify the union as the workers’ bargaining agent. A further hearing on August 20 will determine the boundaries of the bargaining unit.

Meanwhile, the results of the secret ballot vote held at the Thompson, Manitoba Wal-Mart were recently revealed. The workers had voted 67 to 44 against joining the UFCW.

Strike at Aliant continues

Forty-three hundred workers at Atlantic Canada’s largest telecommunications company, Aliant Inc., remain on strike after nearly 14 weeks (since April 23). Talks broke off in July, with the two sides far apart on the main issues in the dispute: contracting out, health benefits, pensions and wages. The company has retained the services of AFI International, a security firm that specializes in strikebreaking, i.e., hiring replacement workers, transporting scabs and management through picket lines, etc.



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