

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 October 2004

## **Colombian truck drivers' strike**

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe urged truck drivers to end a walkout that began September 14, while negotiations continue. The owner-operators are protesting high fuel prices.

The economic impact of the strike increases by one million dollars each day. Over 33 ships are waiting at Colombian ports to load and unload cargo.

## **Brazilian bank strike affects economic activity**

More than 200,000 bank employees in Brazil are participating in the longest banking strike in a decade. Management is attempting to pressure bank employees to end their strike, citing its impact on the 377,000 new retirees whose checks will be directly deposited for the first time. The retirees require an automatic teller machine card, which they must obtain in person at a bank.

Though the strike is the longest since 1990, its effect has not been severe because of the country's expansive network of automatic teller machines, most of which can be used to pay utility bills. The strike began on September 15.

More than half of the nation's bank workers are on strike. They are demanding a 25 percent wage increase. The banks are offering only 8.5 percent.

## **Nicaraguan health workers strike**

Twenty thousand health workers walked out for three days beginning on September 30th to demand wage increases and a larger budget for public health clinics.

The Federation of Health Workers (FEDSALUD) organized the strike. FEDSALUD leaders announced that doctors, nurses and technicians had joined the protest in cities across Nicaragua. During the strike, workers went to their places of employment, but only performed emergency procedures.

On October 1, hundreds of striking workers rallied around the Metrocentro in downtown Managua to publicize their cause. FEDSALUD invited journalists to witness the poor conditions in the Fernando Velez Paiz

Hospital in Managua.

This was the third strike of health workers this year. The entry wage for health workers is \$60 per month, while it takes \$250 to feed a family of four.

## **New Jersey casino hotel workers strike**

Some 10,000 workers who service hotels at seven of Atlantic City's 12 casinos walked out October 1 over management's attempts to carry out non-union expansion at their facilities. The strike involves cocktail waitresses, bartenders, chefs and porters who are members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 54, some of whom receive wages as low as \$8 an hour.

The union failed to reach agreement with Caesars, Harrah's, Bally's, Showboat, Hilton, Resorts and Tropicana. It settled separately with the Sands Casino and three properties owned by Donald Trump.

Ironworkers refused to cross picket lines set up by strikers at Caesars. Casino employees covered under a separate agreement are being compelled to fill in for strikers, however. Harrah's plans to fly in 300 workers from its operations in Chicago and Las Vegas to serve as strikebreakers.

## **San Francisco hotel workers locked out**

Management at ten downtown San Francisco hotels locked out their employees on October 1. The action was in response to a two-week strike of hotel workers against four other San Francisco hotels. All the hotels continued to operate with scab labor.

According to the *San Jose Mercury News*, Mark Huntley, president of a group representing the hotels, had warned the unions that a strike against any of its members would lead to a full lockout. Union leaders said they expected the lockout and blamed the employers for inflaming already tense negotiations. Union members expanded their pickets to the ten other hotels Friday morning.

The union, Unite-Here Local 2, represents hotel workers at 60 San Francisco hotels. The main issue,

according to the union, is the length of the contract. The union seeks a two-year agreement that would expire together with those of other hotel workers across the country. Management wants a five-year contract.

Last month, hotel workers in Los Angeles, Washington D.C and San Francisco voted to strike over this same issue. So far only San Francisco workers have done so.

The four hotels subject to the strike—the Argent, Hilton San Francisco, Crowne Plaza Union Square and Mark Hopkins Inter-Continental—employ about 1,400 union members. Another 2,600 workers were locked out by the ten other hotels.

### **Machinists strike New Hampshire company**

Some 65 machinists, following a near-unanimous vote, walked out on strike October 1 against the Bronze Craft Corporation of Nashua, New Hampshire. The workers struck over cuts in vacation pay and overtime, and a proposal to increase workers' contributions to health care. Company negotiators broke off contract talks and issued a statement citing a 33 percent decrease in sales since September 11, 2001. It warned, "The global market is projected to force sales further downward in the future."

Previously, workers paid only 10 percent of health care costs. Bronze Craft, reporting a 22.8 percent increase in health care expenses, doubled the workers' share to 20 percent. Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics & Allied Workers International Local 257-B asked to see the company's books when confronted with the takeaway demands, but Bronze Craft refused.

### **Hospital workers strike in New Brunswick**

Some 800 health care workers at two hospitals in Moncton, New Brunswick walked off the job last week in an action directed against Tory Premier Bernard Lord. The following day, over 150 strikers picketed the Premier's office, which is in the same riding as the struck hospitals.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and include maintenance, technical and clerical staff. They are fighting for improvements in wages and working conditions. Although over 6,500 CUPE members throughout the province have been without a contract for 14 months and are in a legal strike position, the union has limited its action to the premier's home riding. Almost 60 per cent of union members are

deemed essential and therefore cannot legally strike, but many disruptions are expected to result from the job action. The union blames Lord for not abiding by the recommendations of an Independent Conciliation Board, and has insisted its report be the basis for any new talks.

### **Grain workers strike in Thunder Bay**

Workers at the Great Lakes port of Thunder Bay in northern Ontario have staged rotating strikes as part of a nation-wide job action by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). The job action has affected ports from Vancouver to the Maritimes. Although at least 100 employees are in a legal strike position at the port, the union has opted for rotating strikes involving only 25 workers at any one time.

This strike is part of a broader action by PSAC which could involve more than 80,000 workers across Canada by mid-October. About 300 grain inspectors could join the job action at that time if a settlement isn't reached. Employers are utilizing managers and other non-union staff to perform union jobs, such as loading ships and rail cars.

### **Paper workers strike in Quebec**

Some 325 workers at the Cascades Inc. paper plant in St. Jerome, Quebec are continuing a strike that began after talks between their union and the company broke down two weeks ago. The stalemate came on the issues of wages and working hours. The workers are represented by the Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). Cascades is one of the largest producers of fine papers and cardboard in Canada.

The company is said to be offering wage increases of around 14 per cent over the course of a six-year contract. Other issues include union accreditation and work hours. The company has said it is considering selling off the plant because it is the least profitable of its operations. However, its third-quarter losses were largely a result of the high Canadian dollar.



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