Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 September 2005

Latin America

Mass protests in Brazil

Mass protests took place September 7, Brazil's independence day, against President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's pro-big-business economic policies and government corruption. The protests, which took place in Brazil's main cities, overshadowed the traditional military parades.

The Unitary Labor Confederation (CUT), the Catholic Church and the Movement of Landless Workers (MST) organized the biggest protest—"The Cry of the Excluded"—which took place in Brasilia, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Fortaleza, Recife and Belem. In each of these cities protesters demanded jobs, land reform and an end to government corruption.

The organizers of the march indicated in a press release that while big business benefits from the government's free-market policies, Brazil has 27 million unemployed or underemployed workers. Twenty million families live on less than US$250 a month. Small businesses and workers are forced to pay the highest interest rates in the world.

President Lula attended the Independence Day Parade in Brasilia and was relatively isolated from the protests. He left immediately after the air show and made no statement.

This year marked the 11th "Cry of the Excluded" in what is now an annual event.

Mexican steel workers strike continues

The strike of steel workers and miners in the Lazaro Cardenas mill and the Atisba mine in Michoacan, Mexico is now on its sixth week. Last weekend, the SICARTSA group that owns the mill threatened to use force to remove workers who are occupying the mill, despite a legal order recognizing the rights of the workers to strike. Leaders of the National Miners and Metalworkers Union (SNTMMSRM) threatened to lead a national walkout if the company proceeds with the forced removal. SNTMMSRM officials have so far confined solidarity actions at other mills to one-hour strikes on some Mondays at the beginning of the day shift. Mexico's main labor federation, CTM, refuses to support this strike.

Football strike in Colombia

On September 5, Colombia's professional football (soccer) players walked off their jobs. The players are demanding a collective bargaining agreement with the owners association, and an end to pay irregularities. This is the first football strike in Colombia in 57 years.

Currently Colombian players are forced to sign two separate contracts, a wage contract that represents 10 or 20 percent of their income and a bonus contract. Players complain that their wages, on which their retirement depends, are deliberately kept low. A few of the clubs pay nothing towards retirement benefits.

The Bogota daily *El Tiempo* reports that retired football players often end up in poverty. For instance, Jaime Moron, a top scorer for the Millonarios Club in the 1970s who is now 51 years old and suffers from diabetes, has to rely on his wife's health insurance. He played for 11 years with this club, one of the richest in the league. He reported to *El Tiempo* that even though the club discounted part of his wages toward retirement benefits, that money was never turned in to the government.

John Fredy Vanstrahlen Aguilar, a former goalie for Atlético Bucaramanga, Medellín and Millonarios, is now forced to work two jobs and earns US$430 a month. "The clubs did not even give me a pass to see the games," declared Vanstrahalen.

The strike was sparked by the refusal of the owners associations, Dimayor and the Colombian Football Federation, to negotiate with the players union "Acolfutpro." Instead the owners have offered individual club contracts to the players. Acolfutpro is demanding yearly contracts that include retirement benefits and gaming and television royalties.

United States

No talks in second week of Boeing strike

Machinists in Washington state, Oregon and Kansas entered their second week on strike with no new talks scheduled between Boeing Corporation and the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Workers voted by an 86 percent margin to strike the aerospace manufacturer September 1, claiming the company's latest offer had not addressed job security, pensions and health insurance.

Boeing offered a 5.5 percent raise over the three-year contract with $3,000 bonuses in each of the first two years of the agreement, with a provision that the company would

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provide a $3,000 match if the bonuses were rolled over into the company's 401(k)-style retirement plan. But according to the International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 751 president, the company "doubled and tripled the monthly premiums" and "increased co-pays."

Boeing increased pensions by 10 percent, which was short of what the union wanted and—to the anger of many workers—pales in comparison to the $22 million pension package of CEO James McNerney. According to the IAM, there was no improvement on job security. Back in 2000, the portion of the workforce represented by the IAM was 44,000. Today, that figure has fallen to under 18,000.

The Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), which represents several thousand engineers and technical workers, will begin negotiations in November. Contracts for workers in Washington State expire December 1, followed by a December 5 expiration in Kansas.

Pittsburgh parking lot attendants strike

About 230 parking lot attendants in Pittsburgh went on strike September 7 after disagreements over work rules and benefits with Alco Parking Corporation and the Pittsburgh Parking Authority. Alco, the contractor for parking lot work, insisted that workers pay 10 percent of their health insurance premiums for the first time. The costs will be $44 for single employees and $130 for a family.

Alco offered a 40-cent wage increase over the course of three-year agreement that would raise wages to $13.20 an hour. Teamsters Local 926, which represents the workers, sought a wage increase that would have provided a rise to $13.75.

Byline strike by US Reuters workers

The Newspaper Guild launched a five-day byline strike combined with picketing of Reuters on September 9 to protest the news service's outsourcing of work. Reuters has transferred the editing and writing of captions for photos to Singapore and some Internet work to Toronto.

The byline strike, whereby reporters withhold their names from stories, is the first strike by the guild that will extend beyond a single day. Contract talks with the Newspaper Guild/Communications Workers of America are now three years old. About 450 unionized workers are involved in Reuters United States' operations.

School district to dock paychecks of workers on sick-out

The superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District will dock workers one day's pay for their participation in an August 29 sickout unless they produce a doctor's note. It is estimated about 20 percent of the district's 1,300 custodians, cafeteria workers, secretaries and library workers took part in the sickout.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents the workers, has been involved in 10 months of fruitless negotiations with the district. Workers are angry after having gone three-and-a-half years without a raise. They are also demanding the same health-care coverage for dependents that other school district employees receive. The school district has responded, saying there is no money for wage increases or benefits.

Lockout at New Jersey nursing home

Nursing home workers at Victoria House in Matawan, New Jersey were locked out August 28 after having struck the facility for five days. Workers who attempted to return to work were told by police and management they would be arrested if they did not immediately leave the building.

Service Employees International Union Local 1199 had been negotiating for a minimum of $10 an hour for dietary workers and $11 an hour for Certified Nurse Assistants along with more affordable health care.

Canada

Saskatchewan university workers vote to strike

More than 2,400 workers at the two largest universities in Saskatchewan voted on September 6 and 7 in support of a strike by a margin of 76 percent. Eighteen hundred of the workers are at the University of Saskatchewan and 600 at the University of Regina. All are members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1975. Their previous contract expired on December 31, 2003. The workers have been in negotiations for 21 months, fighting the employers' demands for concessions that will weaken seniority rights, reduce health benefits and deny their joint committee process.

Local 1975 members work in a variety of areas including clerical, maintenance and food services.

Newfoundland woodland workers end strike

Several hundred loggers and silviculture workers at Corner Brook Pulp and Paper mill, who had been on strike since August 22, voted 68 percent to accept a new agreement on September 9. The main issues in the dispute were working conditions and contracting out of work. The workers are represented by Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP). The details of the new contract have not yet been published.

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