

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 September 2005

Latin America

Argentine airline workers strike

Pilots and mechanics for Argentina's main airline, Argentina Airlines, went on strike September 22 over wages. The strike ended after 48 hours with many issues left unresolved under a 60-day stopgap agreement.

The protest strike is the latest in a succession of job actions that have shaken Argentine air transport. Argentina Airlines was established as a government-owned carrier in 1950. After dominating air travel in the South Atlantic, pioneering jet travel and the use of transpolar routes over the South Pole, the Menem government sold it in 1991 to Iberia Airlines—at that time largely owned by the Spanish government—as part of a wave of privatizations.

Union officials charge that Iberia proceeded to dismantle the once profitable airline so that by 2001 it was bankrupt.

After passing through many hands it is now owned by the Marsans Group, a Spanish holding company involved in the tourist trade.

In addition to a 45 percent wage increase, the airline unions are demanding that ownership of the airline be given to Argentine capitalists. Pilots' union Secretary Daniel Biro declared "the stability of our flagship carrier is in jeopardy. Its routes, equipment and airplanes are being dismantled. Our jobs are at risk."

The agreement grants lump-sum payments of 400 and 200 pesos (US\$140 and US\$70) to pilots and maintenance employees respectively, as long as there are no job actions for 60 days. The payments would not be rolled into the wage schedule. Meanwhile, a government commission would study the airline's salary structure.

Doctors strike in the Dominican Republic

Waldo Ariel, president of the Medical Dominican College (CMD), declared last week that the truce between public health doctors and the government of President Leonel Fernandez is over. The CMD accused public health officials of renegeing on an agreement made with the doctors last March.

CMD officials are set to launch a strike in October. Among their demands are a 100 percent wage increase and a program of repairs for all public hospitals to guarantee the health of the poorest Dominicans.

Colombian protests reject trade negotiations

Negotiations over a proposed free trade treaty between Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and the United States provoked street protests in Bogota, Cartagena and other Colombian cities last week by thousands of union members and social organizations. In Bogota alone, over 5,000 people marched and rallied. Central authorities mobilized army and police troops against the protesters

in Cartagena, where the negotiations are taking place.

Carlos Rodriguez, president of Colombia's labor federation (CUT), denounced the government repression, pointing out that it was an "unusual and unprecedented use of force with the object of creating an atmosphere of terror."

Some observers say the prospect of a treaty is already affecting the nation's agricultural sector by discouraging investment. In its current form, the treaty would wipe out Colombia's chicken processing industry. Despite these warnings, the pace of negotiations has increased under pressure from US officials.

United States

Wage-freeze demand in tentative pact at Boeing

Late on Friday, September 23, Boeing and the International Machinist Union reached a tentative agreement during secret negotiations. The tentative contract includes a huge concession in the form of a wage freeze for three years, with only a 1 percent annual cost-of-living increase. The striking workers will vote on the contract on Thursday. If they accept the terms, the 18,400 employees could return to work on Friday, exactly four weeks after the strike began on September 2. More than 16,000 of the strikers were in the Puget Sound area near Seattle, Washington, with 1,000 in Gresham, Oregon near Portland and 900 in Wichita, Kansas.

The strike shut down Boeing's production at multiple plants and forced the company to turn some of its customers over to Airbus, its European competitor. Analysts predicted a month-long strike would delay the delivery of about 30 planes.

Two weeks ago, Mulally announced that the company and the union were more than \$1 billion apart and no talks were scheduled. With the three-year wage freeze demand, Boeing withdrew its original offer of a 5.5 percent raise over three years, and the provision that the company would provide \$3,000 bonuses and an additional \$3,000 match if the bonuses were rolled over into the company's 401(k)-style retirement plan.

The contract includes an 8 percent ratification bonus, worth an average \$5,200 per employee and two lump-sum payments of \$3,000 over the next two years. The company agreed to raise its pension multiplier to \$70 a month for every year worked from its previous offer of \$66 a month, less than the union's original demand of \$80 per month. Boeing dropped its proposal of denying retiree health benefits to newly hired workers. It also agreed not to increase premiums, deductibles, or co-pays in workers' health plans.

The secret negotiations included Alan Mulally, president and chief executive officer of Boeing Commercial Airplanes, Mark Blondin, president of District 751 of the IAM, as well as former House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, whom the company hired

as a consultant. The IAM supported Gephardt in the Democratic Party's presidential primary in 2004.

Texas transit workers launch one-day protest strike

Members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1091 carried out a one-day strike September 22 to protest the demand by Capital Metro in Austin, Texas for a two-tier wage system that would pay new drivers and service workers a scale 16 percent lower than current workers. The contract covering about 600 workers expired in June and was extended twice until final termination on August 19.

Capital Metro issued a news release during the course of the walkout—"Union strike hurts hurricane relief efforts"—charging the strike had prevented the agency from sending buses to help transport people out of the path of Hurricane Rita. However, officials associated with efforts to aid potential hurricane victims denied any request for assistance had been made to Capital Metro.

At the conclusion of the one-day walkout, Capital Metro issued a statement saying that if the union attempted another strike it would hire permanent replacements. Management has also informed the union it will no longer collect union dues from paychecks.

Iowa ordnance strike ends with new contract

About 200 workers at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant in Middletown, Iowa voted to end their nine-day strike September 20 after Machinists Local 1010 reached an agreement with American Ordnance, which operates the plant. Workers will receive a \$2.08 raise over the course of the new four-year agreement, while increases in workers' portion of insurance premiums will be delayed for a year.

Another 200 workers, comprising Teamsters, electricians, sheet metal workers, operating engineers, boilermakers and pipe fitters, honored machinists' picket lines during the strike. The plant, located near Burlington, Iowa, produces artillery and tank shells for the US military.

Muslim meatpackers fired for striking over right to pray

Ten Muslim workers at Tyson Fresh Meats in Norfolk, Nebraska were fired September 17 for walking out to protest the refusal of the meatpacking giant to permit them to pray during working hours. The workers had also walked out the previous day.

Last Friday, after company officials and a representative of the workers held talks, the Muslim workers agreed to postpone future strikes while an agreement is worked out.

Tyson employs about 200 Muslim workers at its Norfolk plant. Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson told the Associated Press, "[B]ecause we're a manufacturing operation, we're not able to let everyone leave the production line at the same time without shutting down entire sections of our operations." Yousef, one of the fired workers, said, "We'd like to keep our job and keep our religion."

Teamsters strike Texas aircraft manufacturer

About half of the 1,500 workers at Weber Aircraft in Cooke County, Texas went on strike September 20 after rejecting the company's most recent contract offer. Teamsters Local 767 says the company has proposed a contract that has 40 points of contention, including an article that will allow the company to subcontract work and another that will replace workers with automated machines while providing no retraining or other job

opportunities within the company.

Weber is offering a 2.75 percent raise to workers. However, union members have gone six years without a raise. Weber's Texas manufacturing facility provides seats for commercial airlines.

Teachers strike continues in Pennsylvania school district

Contract talks have broken off in the two-week-old strike by teachers of the Pottsgrove school district, northwest of Philadelphia. The teachers and district negotiators have stalemated on health care, early retirement incentives, salaries, duties and time.

According to a report in the *Mercury*, the teachers' demand for a 5 percent raise will add only \$500,000 to the \$13 million wage package, well within the district's \$15 million budget. Should the deadlock continue, it could run up against the October 10 date when the state could order teachers back to work to enable the district to meet the minimum required number of school days for the 2005-2006 school year.

Canada

Calgary casino workers on strike

At noon on September 23, 435 workers employed by ABS Calgary Casino walked out after voting 75 percent in favor of a strike three days earlier. The striking dealers, food servers, security staff and other non-management employees at the casino are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4655. According to the president of the Alberta CUPE, the main issue is wages: ABS Casino workers are paid "near minimum wages" that are \$2 to \$3 an hour less than workers at competing casinos.

British Columbia teachers vote to strike

Forty-two thousand British Columbia teachers may walk off the job in one month after they voted September 23 by a margin of 88 percent to go on strike if their salary demands are not met. They are demanding 4, 5 and 6 percent increases over the next three years, challenging the provincial Liberal government's imposed two-year wage freeze for all public sector employees.

With the union planning to gradually increase the pressure, they began job action Tuesday that includes refusing mandated supervision outside regular classroom hours and not submitting student attendance information. On October 11 they will launch rotating strikes, followed by a full-scale strike on October 24 if no progress is made in the negotiations. The teachers are represented by the BC Teachers' Federation.



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