

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 February 2006

Latin America

Court workers, doctors strike in Nicaragua

Workers employed by the Nicaraguan courts went on strike last Friday in the wake of an announcement by the Supreme Court denying them a 20 percent wage increase. Supreme Court President Manuel Martinez justified the courts' decision, saying that the court employees were overpaid relative to the rest of the country.

The strike involves 3,000 clerks and judges and affects all Nicaraguan courts, including those of the nation's two autonomous provinces.

Also on strike are public health doctors. They are demanding a 40 percent wage hike, increases in the public health budget and the elimination of private clinics that operate within public hospitals. The government insists there is no money to meet strikers' demands.

Meanwhile, the cooperatives that represent Managua bus owner-operators are threatening to strike this week. The strike would remove 1,000 buses from circulation. The bus drivers are demanding an increase in government subsidies in compensation for rising fuel costs.

An attempt last year to raise Managua bus fares from 2.50 cordobas (US\$0.14) to 3.50 cordobas (US\$0.20) resulted in popular protests that included street battles between students and the Managua police.

The government of President Enrique Bolanos has the same response to all these struggles: that an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) places severe constraints on the national budget, so there is no money for raises. Under the agreement, the IMF may cut Nicaragua's access to the World Bank and other lending institutions.

Newly elected president confronts airline strike in Bolivia

A strike involving 2,200 pilots has paralyzed Bolivia's flagship airline Lloyd Aereo Boliviano (LAB). The strike presents newly elected President Evo Morales with his first crisis.

The pilots are demanding that the company make a payment of US\$1.5 million to bring their pension funds

up to date. Last Friday, LAB management shut down all its offices in response to the walkout. Company president Ernesto Asbun accused the pilots of being obstinate, and threatened to fire the strikers and hire replacements. Thousands of passengers have been left stranded.

The formerly state-owned company was privatized in 1996 as part of a wave of takeovers of Bolivian industries by private investors. By some estimates, LAB was stripped of some \$66 million in assets in less than two years by speculators associated with the Brazilian airline VASP. Asbun acquired 50 percent of LAB's shares from VASP in 2001.

University employees walk out in Oaxaca, Mexico

Over 1,500 employees of Oaxaca's Benito Juarez Autonomous University, a state-owned institution, walked off their jobs last week. The employees are demanding that university authorities provide a US\$120 cost-of-living subsidy above their regular wages.

University President Francisco Martinez said that the University did not have the money to pay the subsidy. Threatening to join the strike are administrative and academic employees of Mexico's two largest agricultural schools—the Antino Narro and the Chaping campus—who threatened last week to strike in mid-February. The workers are demanding a 20 percent wage hike.

United States

Flight attendant concessions finalized at Continental Airlines

Flight attendants at Continental Airlines ratified a concessions package the previous week worth \$72 million. The International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents the airline's 8,300 flight attendants, said the vote was overwhelmingly in favor and touted the concessions pact as "the industry's leading flight attendant agreement."

The IAM revealed that the four-year agreement provides profit-sharing and stock option schemes. Continental will also begin contributing to the union's National Pension Plan.

The pact comes on top of \$418 million in cuts obtained

from pilots and mechanics. Continental also plans to obtain another \$10 million in concessions from international employees, bringing the total package to its target of \$500 million in concessions. Continental's stock rose 5 percent based on news of the agreement with flight attendants.

Comair gets concessions from mechanics

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) announced last week that the 600 mechanics at Comair, the Delta Airline subsidiary, ratified revisions to their contract that will give back \$1 million in annual concessions to the company. IAM spokesman Joseph Tiberi declared, "This agreement helps meet the needs of the company while assuring that our mechanics remain a part of Comair's future." No vote total was released by the IAM.

The agreement includes a 2 percent cut in wages and eliminates some pension benefits. The lowest-paid mechanics will have a starting wage of \$12.01 an hour. Mechanics with seven years or more will receive \$21.54 an hour.

Last month, Comair pilots voted by a narrow margin to accept a \$17 million concession package. Overall, Comair is seeking \$70 million in concessions as it seeks to restore profitability in the wake of Delta's bankruptcy. It still must obtain concessions from its flight attendants and approval from a bankruptcy judge before implementing the agreements.

World Airways locks out pilots after partial strike

World Airways, the largest commercial carrier of US military personnel, locked out its pilots January 30. Teamsters Local 986, which represents the 400 pilots at World Airways, reported that after the lockout, four pilots were stranded in Luanda, Angola, and told they were "on their own" with no help. Normally, World Airways provides 24-hour armed protection to its pilots in Luanda.

The company action came in retaliation for a partial strike of the airline on January 28 by some pilots. The Teamsters filed a four-count lawsuit in response to the lockout. The union and company have been negotiating a new contract since June 2003.

Report charges government agency with overstating employment rates

The Center for Economic and Policy Research has published a report that alleges the government is systematically overstating the number of Americans who are actually working. The report, entitled, "Missing Inaction: Evidence of Undercounting of Non-Workers in the Current Population Survey (CPS)," states, "Current

labor market estimates appear to be overstating the share of working Americans by 1.4 percentage points. This corresponds to roughly 3 million fewer people working—almost as big a drop in employment as in a typical recession."

The huge disparity is due to the percentage of the population that is not responding to the government's annual population survey, a percentage the report says that has risen from 4 percent in the 1970s to more than 10 percent in the last two years. Non-responders are most likely to be unemployed.

Canada

New Brunswick government workers walk out

Support workers at the government's Workplace Health, Safety, and Compensation Commission (WHSCC) in Saint John, New Brunswick, went on strike on January 30, after the commission rejected a settlement proposed by an independent party. The recommended settlement did not include any change in the 29-year-old program of health and dental benefits, but WHSCC is demanding a reduction.

The last contract for the 109 members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1866 expired on December 31, 2004.

Strike ends at Newfoundland child care center

Twenty-five workers at Daybreak Parent Child Centre in St. John's, Newfoundland, voted to accept a proposed contract, ending a strike that began January 10. The issue in the strike was the wage disparity with other civil servants in the province who perform comparable work. The new contract gives them a 6 percent raise over the next four years, which is the provincial standard.

The workers at Daybreak Centre are represented by CUPE Local 3017.



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