

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 April 2006

## Latin America

### Mexican college workers strike Sonora University

Sixteen hundred members of the Sonora University Employees Union (STEUS) went on strike last Friday in the wake of a breakdown in wage bargaining. The STEUS is demanding a 30 percent wage hike. Negotiations had dragged on for two months with no results.

Last week, a workers' assembly voted 260 to 178 to put up the picket lines at the institution in Northern Mexico. On Thursday, students occupied administration buildings at the university. They handed the building to the strikers on Friday afternoon.

### Bolivian president sends troops against strikers

On March 30, air force troops and civilian police attacked striking Bolivian airline workers at the Cochabamba airport with tear gas and truncheons, in an attack that left more than 20 workers injured.

The workers, employees of Lloyds Aereo Boliviano (LAB) airlines, had occupied three airports—Santa Cruz, Cochabamba and Tarija. LAB employees also attempted to block the road toward the El Alto airport in La Paz. In Cochabamba, strikers blocked the runways, forcing two airplanes in mid-flight to return to their destinations.

The strikers are demanding that President Evo Morales nationalize the nearly bankrupt airline. Last Friday, Morales declared that LAB would not be nationalized. Currently the Bolivian government owns 49.6 percent of the shares in LAB. Government officials say LAB management engaged in corrupt practices that resulted in indebtedness of US\$160 million and wants the state to become liable for the debt if it were to fully nationalize the airline.

The carrier, once wholly owned by the Bolivian State, was sold to VIASA, a Brazilian airline for US\$60 million, a fraction of what it was worth, in 1996. VIASA, and later Asbun, then proceeded to loot the company of its assets, which are now worth US\$2

million.

### Strikes over wages at Argentine universities

On March 29, university professors represented by two separate unions (CONADU and CONADU Historica) launched a series of escalating strikes at 30 public universities in Argentina. The educators are demanding higher salaries, a better retirement package and improved working conditions. Thursday's 24-hour strike will be followed by a 48-hour strike this week and a 72-hour walkout April 18.

### Six philharmonic musicians on hunger strike in Bogota

Six members of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Bogota are on hunger strike against a new government rule that forces public employees to take a qualifying test. The musicians point out that they have been performing for a number of years and that the test is unnecessary.

The strike began on Wednesday, March 29, when violinist Lenin Lozano declared himself on strike. Over the next few days, five other philharmonic musicians joined him. The rest of the 90-member orchestra have joined the hunger strikers in solidarity and support the same demands by picketing and placing signs on the city's walls.

All of Bogota's public employees are being forced to reapply for their jobs by taking a qualifying test.

## United States

### Denver transit workers walk out

A total of 1,750 bus drivers, mechanics and light rail operators in Denver walked off their jobs Monday morning in the city's first transit strike in 24 years. The Regional Transit District (RTD) transports 275,000 commuters each day.

The workers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1001, are opposing management's demand that they share the increase in the cost of health care benefits and accept a meager \$1.80-an-hour increase over three years. Transit workers have had

their wages frozen for three years while RTD officials have gotten big bonuses.

On Sunday, transit workers rejected—by a 55 to 45 percent margin—the contract recommended by the union local’s executive board. On the picket lines Monday morning, strikers carried signs saying “RTD put us on the street, but we’d rather be serving you.”

### **Metal processor hires strikebreakers at Indiana plant**

The Levy Company, a metal reclamations and slag processor, has begun to hire permanent replacements for the 130 workers on strike at its Burns Harbor, Indiana, operations.

When 35 members of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 at Levy’s operations in US Steel’s Gary Works and another 30 workers at the company’s East Chicago site honored picket lines set up by striking workers, they were fired. The union appealed the firings to the National Labor Relations Board, but the appeal was dismissed.

The previous five-year contract between the union and the company expired in April 2005. Local 150 launched its NLRB strike last August.

Leaders of Local 150 have taken no action in response to the latest provocation except to say they will again appeal to the NLRB.

### **Airline executive says flight attendants are overpaid**

Lawyers for Delta Airlines subsidiary Comair charged in bankruptcy court that the union representing flight attendants was “out of step” and that its members were overpaid. “The reality is that they don’t match up with the rest of the market, and the need is to have all our groups paid in line with the marketplace,” Joel Kuplack, Comair vice president of human resources, told a bankruptcy judge. “And with the flight attendants, there is a marked difference there.”

The Teamsters union, which represents Comair flight attendants, has argued that the company is seeking to impose a greater percentage of cuts on its members out of the \$42.3 million in concessions the company claims are necessary to exit bankruptcy. The 970 flight attendants comprise 10.5 percent of the payroll and are being asked to provide 21 percent of the overall concessions.

The company has already negotiated concessions with the pilots and mechanics. However,

implementation of their contracts requires an agreement with the flight attendants.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the union and company continue. Last week, Delta offered to reduce flight attendant pay cuts in return for an agreement that would permit the hiring of part-time workers. The Teamsters are seeking job guarantees in return for concessions.

### **Canada**

#### **Union scuttles Quebec daycare strike**

The union representing 8,000 employees in Quebec public daycare, Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN), announced March 27 that an agreement had been reached with the government and that there would be an immediate end to the daycare strike. In reality, the “strike” was a partial walkout in which the daycare workers started work two hours late on Monday, after the union rejected the government’s offer the previous day. The goal of the walkout was to pressure the provincial government to introduce pay equity measures in the industry where a large majority of employees are female.

The walkout started on March 13, when the daycare workers began work one hour late. Two weeks later, they increased that to two hours, but then the union ended the strike the same day. The details of the “agreement in principle” were not disclosed.



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