

Workers struggles: The Americas

3 April 2007

Latin America

Air Traffic Controllers Strike in Brazil

Last Friday, the Brazilian government suspended all flights in Brazil in response to a strike by air traffic controllers. Security forces also arrested 18 controllers who had taken over the central air traffic control office in Brasilia.

Brazilian President Lula, en route to the United States for a meeting with Bush, ordered the Brazilian Air Force to negotiate with the controllers, some of whom are Air Force personnel. One hundred air traffic controllers refused to carry out their assignments; some declared themselves on hunger strike. The strikers were protesting substandard working conditions and abuse by the Air Force.

The National Association of Flight Protection Workers, which represents the civilian controllers, denounced working conditions as intolerable. “We have reached our limit,” the organization said in a statement. “We have no confidence in our equipment or in our bosses.”

Since an accident between two planes in September that resulted in the deaths of 154 passengers, the air traffic controllers have been on an intermittent slowdown, refusing to handle more planes than what is required by international standards.

The strikers went back to work Saturday morning, after authorities agreed to release the arrested strikers and promised to begin addressing some of their demands.

Argentina: subway employees threaten to strike

Néstor Segovia, leader of subway workers employed by Metrovías in Buenos Aires, declared on March 29 that negotiations with management are at an impasse and convened an assembly to take a strike vote.

Metrovías management offered a raise of 100 pesos for every wage category and rejected the union’s demand for a 20 percent wage increase.

Buenos Aires’ Cervantes Theater strike

Employees of the internationally renowned Teatro Nacional Cervantes and members of the companies that perform there, including the Symphonic Orchestra, the Juna de Dios Filiberto Orchestra, the National Folkloric Ballet, and the Center of Dance and Music, are on strike over wages and working conditions.

Negotiations with the Culture Secretariat at the Ministry of Labor broke down last Wednesday. The culture workers report that over the last two years, the Secretariat had agreed to partial concessions, and that those concessions are now at an end. In addition to decent salaries, they demand structural changes that take into account the technical and artistic nature of the performers’ work.

In a statement to the *La Nación* newspaper, Eduardo Bianchetti, leader of the Association of Government Employees (ATE/cultura), said, “Not only did they not offer us anything, just to sit down with us they demanded social peace—that we rescind the job action. We will not end this strike.”

Patagonian teachers to strike next week

Teachers in Argentina’s Santa Cruz Province voted last Friday to set an April 9 strike date. The strike will last 72 hours. The teachers also marched in the city of Caleta Olivia to protest the government’s decision to send security forces into the schools. The police prohibited entrance to the schools and to other public buildings on Saturday. On Sunday, the police only allowed the entry of custodial employees and some coaches and their teams. Teachers denounced the move as a “militarization of education” in the province.

Santa Cruz teachers conducted an eleven-day strike during the first week of March (at the beginning of the Argentine school year) over wages.

Panamanian construction workers threaten to strike

On March 28, a protest demonstration by construction workers in the city of Colón was attacked by baton-wielding police who also fired tear gas. Ninety-six

workers were arrested; 24 others had been arrested the day before. In response, Genaro López, leader of the United Construction Workers (SUNTRACS), warned that repression against workers' demonstrations by Panamanian authorities could result in a general strike.

Marches and rallies took place last week in several Panamanian cities demanding the enforcement of safety regulations in the wake of the deaths of several construction workers over the last few weeks.

United States

Workers Strike West Virginia Engine Plant

Workers at an engine plant in South Charleston, West Virginia, walked out April 1, opposing massive cuts in health benefits. The 43 workers are members of the Teamsters Local 175. The union charges that management has refused to honor terms of the existing contract since the company, Cummins Crosspoint, was sold last September.

The company has reportedly tripled the amount workers must pay for health benefits and has refused to recognize seniority rights. Negotiations for a new contract were set to begin this week.

Cummins Crosspoint is a subsidiary of Columbus, Indiana-based Cummins Inc. It produces parts for engines, generators and other equipment.

Court upholds strike ban for Northwest flight attendants

A US federal appeals court has left in place a strike ban imposed on Northwest Airlines flight attendants. The bankrupt airline unilaterally imposed wage and benefits concessions on its flight attendants last July, after the workers twice voted them down. The company claimed a strike would put it out of business, and a judge ruled that the union would not be allowed to carry out random, unannounced job actions.

In its unanimous ruling, a three-judge panel of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York made it clear that workers had to pay for the bankruptcy of the airline, complaining, "Northwest's flight attendants have remained intransigent in the face of Northwest's manifest need to reorganize."

The court ruled that flight attendants can only strike if they exhaust the lengthy government-mandated bargaining process. However, federal mediators refuse to declare talks at an impasse, a requirement before airline workers can legally walk off the job.

Canada

Occupation scuttled at auto parts plant

A two-day occupation of a Collins & Aikman auto parts plant slated for shutdown in the working class area of Scarborough in Toronto's east end was brought to a close on Sunday with the intervention of union leaders. A spokesperson for the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), which represents workers at the plant, claimed that they received assurances for increased severance pay for the more-than-200 workers.

The occupation was launched after workers received layoff notices over the past month. It was undertaken in opposition to the union, which had failed to negotiate sufficient severance pay for the workers. Apparently, DaimlerChrysler, which is one of Collins & Aikman's clients, has agreed to contribute C\$1.8 million in additional severance in exchange for assurances that there will be no further disruptions at the plant before it shuts down for good in late spring.

Tentative deal in Ontario school strike

A tentative deal was reached over the weekend between the Durham school board and the union representing 2,100 support staff, who have been on strike in this town north of Toronto since March 21.

Secretaries, education assistants, and custodial and maintenance workers who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) went on strike for improved wages and benefits and against increased workloads that have meant hours of unpaid work. Classes were not interrupted at the 132 schools affected by the strike.

While details of the proposed deal have not yet been made public, the union had been seeking a wage increase of 9.2 percent in a three-year deal, while the board was offering 8.2 percent. If the contract is ratified, workers could return to work by the middle of the week. Negotiations at the neighboring Dufferin-Peel Catholic board have also broken down and will likely go to conciliation.



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