

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 July 1999

Argentine truckers end strike

Faced with government threats to declare a "state of siege," and counting on promises by the legislature to abolish a hated tax, 250,000 Argentine truckers have agreed to go back to work. The strike by independent operators and truck drivers had created a fuel and food shortage in major Argentine cities, including the industrial centers of Mendoza, Rosario and Cordoba.

The week-long strike demanded the rescinding of a 1.5 percent tax on autos and trucks. The tax had been imposed to pay for increases in teacher salaries. In response to hunger strikes and the mass mobilization of teachers earlier this year, the Menem government promised to find the money (US\$700 million) to raise teachers' monthly salaries by \$100.

However constraints imposed by Argentina's currency board, and by agreements with international banking institutions, demanded that the raise be funded through new taxes.

Troops open fire on Ecuadorian protesters

In a clash on Sunday, July 11, Ecuadorian troops shot and wounded eight Indians in the city of Latacunga, during the seventh day of strikes and protests against rising prices and government austerity policies.

The shooting in Latacunga, 90 miles from Quito, occurred when soldiers attempted to clear the Pan-American highway, which was being blocked by the Indians. Protesters have successfully blocked streets and highways, causing shortages in Ecuador's cities. A strike by 40,000 taxi drivers demanding a cut in fuel prices began on July 5. It has received the support of Indians and others, including truck drivers. On July 10, the union representing 50,000 banana workers announced that its members would join a national strike on July 12.

President Jamil Mahuad has declared a national state of emergency. Last week at least 200 strikers were arrested in street demonstrations demanding Mahuad's resignation. There are now widespread rumors that a military coup is being prepared to throw out Mahuad and repress the mass movement.

Ecuador's bank deposits have been frozen for four months to prevent a run on the banks, bank failures and the collapse of the country's currency, the sucre. The country's economy is expected to shrink by 5 percent this year. An International Monetary Fund rescue seems unlikely under Mahuad, since Wall Street is pressuring for strong measures to control the Ecuadorian working class and peasantry.

Salvadoran teachers prepare to strike

The 29,000-strong National Association of Educators (ANDES) is preparing strike action to press its demands for a 30 percent pay raise. Negotiations have been suspended since October. While the government claims that the "teachers' needs will be met," no settlement has been reached. The Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, Fernando Saenz, has called on teachers not to strike, saying their action would make children suffer. The teachers are set to strike for

24 hours this week. They have also threatened a 48-hour strike next week if no agreement is reached.

UNAM students to begin negotiations with university

On July 5, Mexican students who have been occupying the campus of Mexico's largest university for 11 weeks agreed to begin negotiations to settle the strike. The students shut down the 270,000-student university on April 20 demanding that student fees not be raised. They won a partial victory on June 3, when University President Francisco Barnes agreed to make the increase voluntary. By that time, the student demands had broadened to more fundamental issues. The students are engaged in a struggle to prevent the privatization of education in Mexico and the reversal of the rights won as far back as 1918.

The Zedillo government has called for an end to the strike and is attempting to mobilize public opinion against the students by misrepresenting and trivializing their demands. The specter of the student massacre of 1968 is also being raised, to intimidate students into reopening the university. Student leaders indicated that their agreement to negotiate does not include lifting the occupation at this time.

Honduran University students and professors reject privatization

Student representatives, professors and administrators of the Honduras Autonomous University met July 10 to reject draft legislation, favored by the World Bank, to privatize the university. "We are ready to defend the university and the right of people to have access to a free university education," said Juan Pineda, secretary general of the Autonomous National University of Honduras (UNAH).

The draft legislation intends to cut off the control that students have over the university. This self-government, or autonomy, was established through bitter continent-wide struggles in 1918. Elvin Acosta, president of the Federation of University Students of Honduras, observed that "at this time, the task of defending the rights of future generations to university education has been imposed on us." UNAH encompasses campuses in six cities and an off-campus extension, serving 45,000 students.

Oakland longshoremen end wildcat strike

Striking Port of Oakland (California) dockworkers returned to their jobs Thursday, July 8, after two days on a wildcat strike over what they charge is a safety issue. The 1,400 members of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) walked off the job after the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents shipping interests, refused to hire a required second "signalman" to watch over the transfer of containers between tractor-trailers and cargo vessels.

The Oakland action comes after the expiration of the contract covering 14,500 ILWU members and a break over the Fourth of July weekend in contract talks. Following the wildcat strike, ILWU members in Los Angeles, Portland, Tacoma, Seattle and Long Beach

refused to carry out the usual practice of working overtime and during their lunch breaks to keep up with the large volume of cargo moving in and out of West Coast ports. The Associated Press reported, but later retracted, the claim by ILWU Local 10 spokesperson Steve Stallone that the slowdowns were in sympathy with the Oakland strikers. Stallone said the refusal to work extra hours was in response to the contract talks and separate from the walkout over safety issues in Oakland. Of the slowdown, Stallone said, "They feel they're not getting good faith from the PMA right now in negotiations, so why should they be busting their butts?"

The Pacific Maritime Association called on the National Labor Relations Board to force the Oakland strikers back to work.

The Oakland strike left some ships moored to the docks and others anchored in San Francisco Bay with their cargo on board. Items such as cotton, automobile parts, California fruit and computer components sat on docks. Management rushed to hook up generators to refrigerated containers to avoid the spoilage of perishable goods.

One estimate calculates that a five-day shutdown of all West Coast ports would cost the national economy an estimated \$3.9 billion and result in the loss of nearly 12,000 jobs. West Coast Ports handled some \$266 billion in goods last year. More than half of the containerized cargo moving in and out of the United States every year passes through their ports.

ILWU officials have received a proposal from the Pacific Maritime Association management. According to reports it contains a 32 percent increase in pension benefits for future retirees and a 15 percent raise for those presently retired. No other details are available.

Teamsters call off strike against Overnite Transportation

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters called off a series of strikes July 9 against Overnite Transportation Co. in a bid to win a labor contract at the giant trucking company. The IBT termed the action an Unfair Labor Practices strike, charging Overnite has harassed workers seeking union recognition, fired others and unilaterally changed working conditions without consulting the union over the organizing period that began in 1994.

The strike began July 5 with shutdowns in Atlanta, Marietta, Indianapolis, Memphis, Kansas City and North Atlanta involving about 1,400 workers at six terminals. Workers at another five terminals, including Miami, New Orleans, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, walked out before the strike was called off. The IBT is presently certified at 21 of Overnite's 166 US terminals and represent about 2,000 of the company's 8,200 drivers and dockworkers. Another 17 terminals await certification elections. Overnite is fighting back with 14 decertification proceedings at the certified locations.

Overnite used a pool of 1,000 replacement workers who were rushed to trouble spots in their system to keep operations going. Several hundred workers began to cross picket lines as the strike continued before IBT President James P. Hoffa declared the strike "an unqualified success" and ordered an unconditional return to work.

Overnite company spokesman Ira Rosenfeld gloated, "If this was a litmus test of the strength of the Teamsters at Overnite, I think the results speak for themselves." Overnite declared it would allow the long, drawn-out legal process of the National Labor Relations Board to wear down resistance by its workers. "Overnite is content to let the legal process run its course in time—months, or even years. We have no plans to meet with the Teamsters to discuss the charges."

The Teamsters called a similar strike last summer in an attempt to get discussions with Overnite, which is a subsidiary of the number one railroad enterprise Union Pacific Corporation. Overnite posted

\$8.5 million in first quarter net earnings on \$252.8 million in revenues. It is the largest non-union "less-than truckload," or LTL, trucking company. LTL carriers transport cargo to central terminals where it is consolidated into larger shipments.

Quebec nurses union calls 48-hour truce

The Quebec Federation of Nurses has called on its 47,500 members to halt their two-week strike and go back to work for 48 hours while it seeks a settlement with the Parti Quebecois government of Premier Lucien Bouchard. The truce, which rank-and-file workers were voting on Monday, was called as popular support for the nurses' action has severely weakened the Bouchard government. Nurses have defied anti-strike laws and penalties in a struggle widely perceived as a fight against the attack on the healthcare system and the living standards of public sector workers.

The nurses, whose entry-level wages are the lowest in the country, are demanding a 10 percent catch-up raise and a 6 percent wage hike over two years, followed by a third year raise that would be open to negotiation. The government has held fast to its offer of a 5 percent raise over three years, fearing that any breakthrough by the nurses would be emulated by 400,000 public sector workers.

The government has hit nurses with punitive legislation, including docking two hours pay for each hour off the job. Nurses getting their first paychecks this week since the walkout began lost up to \$700 each. Meanwhile, a secret PQ scheme to turn public opinion against the nurses was exposed last week. Internal memos sent by PQ organizers urged members to bombard radio talk shows and newspapers' letter pages with anonymous messages denouncing the nurses for holding the sick hostage. Nurses union leader Jennie Skene responded to the revelations by urging nurses not to be provoked.

Ontario mine workers walk out against Falconbridge

More than 700 smelting workers at Falconbridge's Kidd Creek mine in Timmins, Ontario walked off the job July 8 when contract talks broke down. Falconbridge is Canada's largest copper mining company, producing 2.2 percent the world's zinc and 1 percent of the world's copper.

The company and the Canadian Auto Workers union, which represents the workers, have been negotiating for five months over a first contract at the unit. According to the union, money is not one of the key issues. Seniority, job security benefits and a proposal by the mining giant to reduce sick pay provisions are the main areas of dispute.

The shutdown of the Kidd Creek facility sparked a rally in copper and zinc prices in financial markets. This strike comes amid speculation of shutdowns at other major facilities around the world including the Highland Valley copper mine in British Columbia, and in the wake of mass layoff announcements by US and Australian copper producers, Phelps-Dodge and BHP.

Union averts strike at Air Canada

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) agreed to a settlement with Air Canada July 8, averting a planned strike by flight crews. The settlement reportedly provides a 12 percent wage increase over three years.

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