

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 December 1999

Public sector workers battle police in Argentina

Hundreds of public sector workers and teachers demanding back pay fought state troopers on December 18 in Corrientes Province, which borders Brazil and Paraguay. The workers had been occupying a bridge that links all three countries. The battle left two youth dead and 50 other people wounded. There was also an unconfirmed report that a pregnant woman died as a result of asphyxiation. The dead youth were shot, even though police claimed they had only been issued rubber bullets and tear gas for the battle.

On December 12 the workers began their occupation of General Belgrano Bridge to demand three months' back pay. Other workers removed goods from a supermarket and burned cars in the city of Corrientes, 750 kilometers north of Buenos Aires. In response to the police violence the CTA (Argentine Workers Central) union declared a national strike for this Monday.

The government under newly installed President Fernando de la Rúa attempted to defuse the conflict, promising \$30 million in aid this week to begin paying back wages. Earlier it had blamed "extreme left" individuals from other provinces for contributing to the incidents. The wage debt was left by the outgoing Menem administration, which, while pursuing neo-liberal free market policies, imposed severe cuts in social programs. Consequently the provinces and municipalities built up large deficits. Corrientes is \$90 million in debt, and 80 percent of its workers are public employees.

Argentina's economy is reeling from the effects of Brazil's 1999 financial crisis, and is suffering depression levels of unemployment. The economy is expected to shrink by another 2.4 percent in 2000.

Mexican students protest police violence

On December 16, 3,000 students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) protested in front of the US Embassy in Mexico City. This was their second protest since last Saturday, when a similar demonstration resulted in pipe bombs being thrown.

The students, who have been on strike for eight months, burned an effigy of Uncle Sam and a US flag, calling attention to their charge that the violence of December 11 was the work of agents provocateurs, which created the pretext for police repression and arrest of 73 students.

Following the rally, the students marched into downtown Mexico City, tearing down PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) electoral posters. PRD leader Cuauhtemoc Cardenas is Mexico City's mayor and also a presidential candidate in next year's election. The students hold him responsible for the police repression.

Northwest Airlines threatens to fire flight attendants if they join job action

Northwest Airlines threatened December 15 that any of its 11,000 flight attendants who engage in work stoppages or slowdowns would be fired and the airline would seek damages from the Teamsters union for any costs resulting from the disruption.

The warning was e-mailed to all flight attendants by Northwest Vice President Hector Adler. Adler warned flight attendants not to "place your career at risk." Besides citing sickouts and slowdowns as grounds for termination, Adler also declared a "work to rule" campaign unlawful, hoping to intimidate attendants from using this tactic during the holiday

travel season.

Adler's threat came on the heels of demonstrations by flight attendants outside Northwest Terminals last week. Demonstrators distributed handbills that asked the public, "how would you like to sit on the runway for three and a half years," a reference to the extended period during which attendants have been without a contract. The demonstration was the first one held by Teamsters Local 2000 since last spring.

In June a tentative agreement was reached and strongly endorsed by the Teamsters bureaucracy. But rank-and-file attendants, who gave up major concessions in the early 1990s and have seen only one raise since then, denounced the deal as a sell-out. In August the tentative agreement was soundly defeated by a 69 percent margin and Local 2000 President Billie Davenport came under severe criticism from workers.

On December 7 the Teamsters met again with Northwest under the supervision of the National Mediation Board (NMB) and presented proposals that raised the demand for an industry-leading contract. Northwest reacted by declaring the proposal was triple the cost of the previous tentative agreement. The NMB declared the proposal "unrealistic" and recessed talks indefinitely.

Flight attendants were uniformly disgusted with the company's response and equally upset at the NMB's action that further postpones an agreement. But many workers are again angry with the Teamsters bureaucracy for its handling of the negotiations. It is believed that any resolution of the contract or a possible strike is at least six months off.

Last ditch negotiations to prevent Minnesota state employees strike

State mediators scheduled new talks between state labor negotiators and the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE) for December 27. The decision to resume talks came two days after the 7,200-member union voted for strike action, which could begin on the eve of the new millennium.

These are the first talks since August 26 and come one day before the expiration of a 10-day cooling off period, set to expire December 28. Last November MAPE members rejected by a 73-27 percent margin proposals from the early talks. The members then voted by 69 percent to authorize the first state strike since 1981.

Workers are calling for two 4 percent increases as opposed to the 2½ percent raises offered by the state. The state has attempted to justify its position by pointing out that the increases are the same as those received by members of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). However, MAPE members counter that they do not receive overtime. Among other issues in dispute is the state's practice of leaving vacant positions unfilled and then forcing workers to put in as many as 65 hours in a week without any compensation after 40 hours.

If no agreement is reached, the union has said it would begin selected walkouts against the computer data and finance departments before launching a full strike.

Comair sues Airline Pilots Association over slowdown

The commuter airline Comair Inc. launched a suit December 16 against the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), charging it with responsibility for a slowdown that cost the company \$900,000. The suit claims pilots taxied planes at reduced speeds on runways to cause commuters to miss connections. It also charges pilots used excuses such as broken lights,

coffee pots and torn cushions to justify cancellation of flights.

The action caused the cancellation of more than 400 flights at airports such as Cincinnati International Airport. Comair is requesting the federal courts order ALPA to stop the slowdown and is seeking a jury trial for the pursuit of damages. ALPA, while admitting that the action is related to pilots' disgust over the slow pace of negotiations for a new contract, denies it orchestrated the slowdown.

ALPA, no doubt mindful of the \$45.5 million judgment against the Allied Pilots Association (APA) at the beginning of 1999 over its sick-out against American Airlines, declared, "Our immediate focus is to work with the company to restore normal operations as soon as possible... Any activity of such a nature that may have occurred is unauthorized."

Comair, which operates 104 jets, is partly owned by Delta Air Lines. Delta is presently awaiting regulatory approval to obtain full control.

Crew members at Tower Air reject tentative agreement

Cockpit crews for Tower Air Inc. defeated a tentative agreement reached between the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) and management. Ninety percent of the 250 crew members defeated an agreement described by the company as "mutually beneficial."

Workers have been involved in contract negotiations since 1996. In June 1998 cockpit crews voted to join ALPA. The union gave no explanation for the resounding defeat delivered against the tentative contract. Tower Air is based at New York's Kennedy International Airport and runs scheduled and charter flights.

UAW workers ratify Saturn contract

The risk-reward arrangement at Saturn that United Auto Workers leaders and General Motors had agreed to over many years has been overhauled after workers demanded a more certain salary package. Workers voted 2,220-271 Sunday for a four-year contract that is much closer to those negotiated by UAW for other US autoworkers, officials with UAW Local 1853 said.

The contract covers Saturn's 7,200 workers in Spring Hill, Tennessee and about 100 at the company's engineering center in Madison Heights, Michigan. Union officials say the new contract would add 15 percent to base pay, retroactive to September 20. It calls for 3 percent pay rises each year for four years, plus a \$1,350 up-front bonus and other economic gains.

Under a "risk-and-reward" pay program, Saturn employees earned 12 percent, or about \$6,000 less in salary than General Motors' other workers, but received bonuses for reaching productivity and quality goals. This arrangement was used by the UAW and Saturn to promote the claim that management and workers had a common interest in cutting costs and boosting profits. But as the demand for small cars waned in recent years, Saturn's sales fell and worker bonuses shriveled, and the agreement became a source of friction.

Under the new contract, Local 1853 President Ron Hankins said the company would pay the workers 100 percent of their base salary. Then, if the training and quality targets are not met, the company could withhold up to 5 percent—not 12 percent—of the base pay in the following quarter.

Bonuses for meeting production goals still remain in the contract. But they will only kick in if Saturn's sales increase. Last year the UAW threatened a strike until Saturn agreed to produce a sport utility vehicle, which it is hoped will boost sales. Production on the new SUV will not begin until 2001.

According to Saturn spokesman Bill Betts the joint union-management relationship was not affected by the election of a new leadership at the Spring Hill plant: "Saturn's partnership with the UAW remains fully intact."

Teamsters push NLRB for nationwide injunction against Overnite Transportation

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters has filed an unfair labor practice charge against Overnite Transportation, seeking an injunction

against the nation's sixth largest trucking company.

The charge bases itself for the most part on testimony from a former Overnite operations manager in Memphis who fired more than 40 drivers and dockworkers for union activity before reversing himself and agreeing to testify against the company. The Teamsters allege the highest levels of management orchestrated a campaign of harassment, intimidation, surveillance, firings and withholding of wages against pro-union workers since 1994.

The Teamsters hope to get the National Labor Relations Board to consolidate the various charges into an overall case against Overnite and not treat the complaints as isolated incidents.

The Teamsters claim to represent 40 to 45 percent of Overnite's workers and have been certified the bargaining agent at 22 Overnite terminals. But they have failed to achieve a contract, whose major stumbling point is the union's desire to control pension funds for Overnite employees. Since October 24 some 2,000 out of 8,000 Overnite workers have been out on strike in an effort to establish a nationwide contract. Teamsters President James P. Hoffa has limited the strike to token picketing at the terminals and appeals to Overnite's corporate customers to stop doing business with the trucking company until it recognizes the union.

Calgary Herald workers continue strike

More than 200 workers at the *Calgary Herald* are continuing a walkout that began on November 10. The workers are represented by two different unions—the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union and the Graphics Communications International Union—which are both negotiating their first contracts.

The newspaper workers are fighting for improved wages and job security and well as against business owner Conrad Black's attempts to intimidate reporters and quash their free speech rights. Maude Barlow, national chairwoman of the public advocacy group Council of Canadians, said, "We believe the *Calgary Herald* is being used by Mr. Black as an example of a way to break the unions, break the desire for a union and break the independence of free speech rights of journalists in Canada." Canadian Labor Congress president, Ken Georgetti called it "a battle between a small group of newspaper workers and a business baron."

The *Herald* has continued to publish and distribute the paper with replacement workers, management and 35 workers who have either never joined the strike or have since crossed the picket line. Last week a union-organized rally of 500 supporters from across Alberta was met by show of force by police, equipped with riot gear, horses, paddy wagons, ambulances and tow trucks. The *Herald* has since applied for an injunction to curb the strikers' activities.

Instead of mobilizing the support of the working class to fight this government-backed union-busting, the Canadian Labour of Congress (CLC) has launched a boycott of Conrad Black's *National Post*. Similar public relations stunts by the CLC, including boycotts against Molson's Breweries and Maple Leaf Foods in Ontario—which has just permanently closed its doors to 120 unionized employees at its meat-processing plant in Etobicoke—as well as Coca-Cola in British Columbia have done nothing to defend the interests of the workers involved. Moreover, similar campaigns launched at strikebound newspapers in the US, including the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*, have also ended up in disaster.

Black, responding to the boycott announcement, said, "It will not influence one advertiser or one subscriber ... call all the boycotts and press conferences they want, they can't intimidate us and it will give great pleasure to demonstrate that fact." He added that, "If they want a union, they can have a union. But they shouldn't imagine that having a union is going to get them any better contract than what they had before on a non-contractual basis—no worse and no better."

Quebec public sector unions reach a deal

After more than 18 months of negotiations, the Quebec public sector unions representing 400,000 unionized workers, have backed an

agreement-in-principle with the Bouchard government for new labor contracts.

A proposed general strike by a common front of Quebec public sector unions was canceled after teachers, nurses, hospital support staff and civil servants registered a vote of no-confidence in their union leadership, with the majority of workers and union locals refusing to vote strike authorization. Public sector workers were greatly influenced by the defeat of the 23-day nurses strike last summer. During that struggle union officials called off the strike just as it was growing into a major confrontation with Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard's budget-cutting agenda.

The four-year deal gives Bouchard labor peace until the next election. The agreement-in-principle, includes a wage increase of 9 percent over four years with 1.5 percent in 1999 and 2.5 percent per year between 2000 and 2002. The Bouchard government had previously stated that it could only offer workers a 5 percent raise over three years. So far nothing has been said on working conditions, which have been of major concern in healthcare and education.

University of Toronto teaching assistants set to strike

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3902, representing 2,400 teaching assistants at the University of Toronto, filed a complaint last week with the Ontario Labour Relations Board. The union claims that U of T "is preparing to cancel courses for which bargaining members have already been hired," adding that a U of T professor had told a hopeful teaching assistant "that the choice of instructor for the course would be influenced by whether the appointee was union or nonunion."

Denying any wrongdoing, U of T's vice-president of administration and human resources, Michael Finalyson, said that the university has to prepare for a possible walkout by the teaching assistants. CUPE has set a strike mandate for December 22. U of T has yet to bargain with four other CUPE locals that are threatening strike action in January.

The teaching assistants want their wages to be indexed to the price of tuition, as was the settlement with York University in November. Meanwhile teaching assistants at Hamilton's McMaster University are entering their third week of strike action.

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