

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 October 2000

Ecuadorean health workers fight corruption

Ecuadorean health workers plan to strike this week to demand an investigation into corruption in two sanitation programs. Health Minister Fernando Bustamante's aides appear to be involved. Joaquin Chaluja, national secretary of the Single Union of Health Workers (SUTS), demanded an inquiry into price surcharges on malaria control medications. In addition, he said that other issues include the demand for a bigger budget for maternity programs and free medical care.

Mexican public employees demand bonuses

On October 26 and 27, the country's public employees paralyzed Mexico City's congested arteries to protest the decision of the Ernesto Zedillo administration to end the traditional end-of-term bonus given to state workers once every six years by the outgoing regime.

The six-year bonus affects 1.6 million public employees and would cost about \$500 million, which Zedillo claims the government does not have. The unions, traditionally closely tied to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), are threatening a national strike over the issue.

At the height of the protest, thousands of striking public employees blocked hundreds of streets, highways and rail lines in the region, affecting traffic in about 75 percent of the capital. The strikers also denounced the union leadership for having initially accepted Zedillo's no-bonus stand. State workers union leader Joel Ayala was met by chants of "Hypocrite! Two-faced!" for having belatedly changed his position.

Carlos Abascal Carranza, rumored to be president-elect Vicente Fox's incoming secretary of labor, cautioned, "The future of the nation is at stake." He called on state employees to return to work. Carranza promised higher wages so that public employees would not have to depend on the bonus. Fox is to officially assume office on December 1.

Mexican university workers in contract struggle

Authorities of Mexico's leading university UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) offered its employees, members of the UNAM Workers Union (STUNAM), a 10.5 percent increase in wages and a 2.5 percent increase in benefits. The offer is a far cry from the 50 percent that STUNAM is demanding. STUNAM has created a General Strike Committee that will study the offer on November 2 and decide on a course of action.

Peruvian port workers oppose privatization

Workers at five Peruvian ports are calling for an end to a privatization project by the Alberto Fujimori regime. The 200,000-member National Port Federation (FNP) voted to authorize a strike on November 27 if the plans are not shelved. On October 27, scores of workers with banners and picket signs denounced the project during a congressional debate on the privatization plan.

Former Bridgestone/Firestone workers testify in suit against tire maker

Four former workers at Bridgestone/Firestone's Decatur, Illinois

plant testified in a federal suit against the tire maker that they were given less than 30 seconds to inspect a tire and were subjected to the heavy pressure of daily quotas and the threat of being fired.

Bridgestone/Firestone agreed under pressure from federal investigators to recall 6.5 million tires that are believed to be involved in 119 deaths, 500 injuries and 3,700 complaints due to tread separation that led to highway accidents.

The workers said they followed Bridgestone's guidelines for quality control even though they may not have agreed with it. One procedure called for workers to poke an awl completely through the sidewall of new tires. "I objected to it, but I did it," said Jim Wagoner, who believes this practice may have made tires less safe. "I didn't want to get fired," he said.

Attorneys for Bridgestone attempted to portray Wagoner, who was replaced during a bitter strike in the middle 1990s, as a disgruntled worker. Charles Hilton, a Bridgestone lab technician, testified that workers at the plant were conscientious and paid attention to detail.

Partial settlement in Los Angeles County strike

Los Angeles County negotiators and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) reached a tentative agreement October 26 covering a majority of the 47,000 public service workers. The pact will be put to a mail-in ratification vote over the next month.

Some 39,000 clerks, welfare workers, road maintenance workers, hospital technicians and other county workers will receive raises between 9 and 14.5 percent over the life of a three-year agreement. Union members had wanted a 15 percent wage hike while the county tried to hold the line at 9 percent. A series of rotating one-day walkouts leading up to a countywide shutdown on October 11 put workers in a favorable position. But the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, politicians and county management moved to end the strike through an appeal by Los Angeles Archdiocese Cardinal Roger Mahoney, who said the strike was hurting the poor who rely on county services.

The agreement included a 15 percent increase in retirement benefits, cost-of-living increases for pension payments and health-care coverage for part-time employees. Workers also wanted an end to medical co-pays but it is not clear this was attained. Negotiations continue in an effort to reach a settlement for the remaining union members, comprising some 8,000 librarians and health care workers.

The county is also in negotiations with seven other separate unions, including the bargaining unit representing doctors.

Television workers strike California station

Technical workers at the Spanish-language television network Univision in Los Angeles walked out on strike October 23 after management refused to address issues involving job security and wages.

KMEX Channel 34 and the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET) Local 53 have been locked in negotiations for the past eight months. Univision has been seeking to weaken the contract by attempting to dissolve classifications

governing job assignments involved with computer technology.

The contract, which covers 120 workers comprising camera operators, writers and sales assistants, expired March 31. At that time workers at Univision's Fresno, California station carried out a 43-day hunger strike in a struggle for wages, job security and a holiday schedule.

United pilots ratify contract

Pilots at United Airlines ratified a new labor contract by a 95 percent margin October 25 that provides industry-leading pay. Some 8,000 of the 10,500 members of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) voted on the pact, which provides immediate raises between 21.5 and 28.5 percent and 4 percent annual increases for the life of the agreement.

Pilots who captain a Boeing 737 will receive an annual salary of about \$175,000 while those operating a Boeing 747 will earn in the neighborhood of \$260,000.

The agreement was reached back on August 26 after a protracted period of stubborn resistance by rank-and-file pilots who refused to work overtime and compelled United to cancel 25,000 flights and suffer thousands of delays.

Under the contract United was allowed to expand its regional jet force. United Express, the airline's lower-cost affiliate, operates approximately 300 50-seat planes.

The contract has prompted the company's 25,000 flight attendants to call for their 10-year contract to be reopened to negotiate wage increases. The 44,000 members of the International Association of Machinists are presently involved in talks with the company.

Meanwhile, pilots at Delta and American Airlines are also in negotiations, seeking to equal or overtake the new standard established by the United pilots.

California hospital workers hold one-day strike

Over 3,400 hospital workers in the San Francisco Bay Area held a 24-hour strike October 25 to protest management staffing policies and patient care. Registered nurses, therapists, technicians, secretaries and various staff workers walked out at Seton Medical Center, Saint Francis Memorial Hospital, St. Mary's Medical Center, Alta Bates Medical Center, Eden Medical Center, Summit Medical Center, Sutter Solano Medical Center and Sutter Lakeside Hospital.

Striking technologists in Newfoundland face contempt-of-court charges

The Newfoundland Supreme Court has brought contempt-of-court charges against 98 striking x-ray and laboratory technologists for ignoring court injunctions ordering them back to work. Workers charged are among the 600 technologists, members of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees, who went on strike October 18 protesting their exclusion from the province's recent wage increase for nurses and other health care workers.

The province has offered to appoint a mediator providing that the 600 strikers return to work. Chief Justice Jerek Green stated that the technologists will nevertheless have to appear in court, adding, "The integrity of the law must be maintained." Health Minister Roger Grimes said there will be no bargaining until that time. Meanwhile, routine tests such as x-rays and blood analysis have been put on hold, resulting in the cancellation of elective surgery in several hospitals in St. John's Clareville, Stephenville, Corner Brook and Bonavista.

Vancouver city workers reject union deal

Vancouver city workers have voted 51 percent against the latest contract offer, going against the recommendation of their union's

bargaining committee. On October 24, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 15 witnessed its biggest-ever voter turnout, with 1,750 of the city's 2,800 support staff, clerks, parking attendants and planners in attendance. With the latest contract rejection, union officials are at a loss as to what their next move should be. Meanwhile, some members are talking of strike escalation and considering asking the bargaining committee to resign.

A key issue in the strike is the fight to regain a four-day workweek that had been in existence for decades but was rescinded by city council two years ago. Where they once had 41 days for extra time worked, the latest contract offers a substantial reduction to 14 days. The financial strain has been significant for many of the city workers who have been on strike since September 28. Some workers are losing up to \$2,000 a month, which will not be recovered.

Union turf war hits Montreal truckers strike

Over 1,200 independent truck drivers in the Montreal area have been on a wildcat strike since October 22 over union recognition in their fight against soaring fuel costs. They have at the same time been caught in a jurisdiction battle between Quebec's two largest union federations over which has the right to represent them.

A court ruling last month said that the independents can be regarded as employees instead of "contractors," giving them the right to be represented by a union. While all but one of the forty companies targeted in the strike have refused to negotiate a union contract, the CNTU, which claims to represent the striking truckers, is accusing the Quebec Federation of Labour's Teamsters union of signing up scab workers to replace striking drivers.

Over the weekend about 200 trucks were involved in traffic slowdowns across the city, while picket lines have been set up at numerous transport centers as well as at the 40 companies involved in the dispute. Union leaders have effectively hampered the strike action, calling on truckers to abide by a court injunction prohibiting blockage of the Montreal Port Authority, the center of business transport.

Under pressure of increased costs and competition, truckers have been forced to take on increased workloads and some have sought protection under a union contract. Truckers across North America have been embroiled in battles with employers and governments in their efforts to counteract sharp hikes in fuel costs of as much as 75 percent over the last year. In Ontario a deal was reached last week brokered by a government mediator, offering about 10 percent of the province's 20,000 independent truckers a possible allowance of an 8.9 percent fuel surcharge, dependent on voluntary participation of industry.

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