

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 January 2001

Mexico City subway workers strike

Mexico City Metro workers went on strike last week to protest bad working conditions and the firing of 100 workers, and to demand a 10 percent pay raise. The workers from the Ticoman and Tasquena maintenance shops indicated that they do not have adequate safety equipment and their requests for helmets, boots and gloves have been ignored by management.

Mexico City's mayor, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, denounced the strikers and threatened to shut the entire system down if it became unsafe. Lopez Obrador agreed to negotiate on wages, however. The PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) leader denied that any violations of workers' rights were taking place. Metro subway director Manuel Fuentes threatened to suspend or fire workers involved.

Protests continue in Ecuador

Ecuadorian workers, students and Indians held a mass rally January 21 to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the coup that brought down the Mahuad government. The demonstration also served as a protest against policies of the government of Gustavo Noboa, which recently approved an increase in fuel prices, bus fares and food prices demanded by the IMF. These measures were denounced by the organizations that began protests on January 2.

Puebla, Mexico workers threaten to strike

The secretary of the Mediation and Conciliation of the Mexican State of Puebla, Jorge Ramos Lobato, confirmed that he has received 397 strike requests in this industrial region of Central Mexico. Nearly 80 of the threatened strikes are over salary disputes; nine over labor law violations. The balance are over new contract agreements. Workers are demanding raises averaging 25 percent.

Indonesian workers in solidarity with Mexican strikers

Indonesian workers at Pt. Kuk Dong International, have expressed solidarity with Kuk Dong workers in Mexico, who were locked out last week by the textile company after walking out to win recognition for a new union. The January 17 letter, from a trade union in Jakarta, said, "We are supporting you in your demands that the company reinstate workers who are being dismissed and that went on strike without intimidation and any direct or indirect pressure, as well as to eliminate the current trade union and recognize the trade union which is formed on the basis of the workers' will.

"We also experienced what you are feeling now. From 1991 to 1997 we had low wages, and often there was violent

treatment by the management. Every time we wanted to form a trade union we were intimidated by the management. Some workers were dismissed and other workers were transferred to different divisions."

The letter concluded that although the Indonesian workers had won recognition, wages and conditions were still low and that workers were engaged in a struggle to improve their situation. Kuk Dong produces clothing for many universities in the US, including those carrying logos for Nike and other companies.

Nicaraguan maquiladora workers fight for union rights

A verbal agreement arrived at 10 days ago between the Nicaraguan Garment Workers Federation (CST) and representatives of the Nien Hsing Consortium provided for the rehiring of two union officers and at least 80 percent of 128 union members from among the 700 who were fired last year. It also included the dropping of all legal actions, and the signing of a labor protocol which would cover all Nien Hsing-owned factories in Nicaragua.

However, after reviewing the 128 files of the workers to be re-hired, management now says that it will only rehire seven of the union members. Union negotiators called this unacceptable and no further negotiations have been scheduled.

Chentex management claims the factory is facing financial difficulties because of union activity and a boycott affecting Wal-Mart, JC Penney, Kohl's and other retailers. Management is threatening to close two production lines and lay off around 200 employees. They also said the factory may be forced to close completely, leaving the 1,800 Chentex workers without jobs, if orders continue to decline. Pedro Ortega, head of the Garment Workers Federation, claims only Wal-Mart, which is not one of the factory's major clients, has cut back on its orders.

Disputes in airline industry continue

Flight attendants set up informational picket lines January 19 at American Airlines counters at Dallas-Fort Worth International and other airports around the country.

On January 11, the day after American Airlines' parent company, AMR Corp., announced plans to buy Trans World Airlines and 20 percent of US Airways from United, the flight attendants union announced it would hold a strike-authorization vote in the coming weeks. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants have been working without a contract for the last two years.

Under the federal Railway Labor Act, passed in 1927, airline

workers cannot strike when a contract ends, but must first go through a federal mediation period and, if the mediator declares an impasse, a 30-day cooling-off period before they can legally strike. As a result airlines have deliberately delayed contracts, forcing workers to work under the old agreements. Most of the old union contracts, passed in the early to mid-1990s, had concessions demanded by the airlines who said they would collapse without the wage and benefits give-backs. During the late 1990s, however, many carriers posted \$1 billion in annual profits.

In other airline industry developments, Delta Air Lines Inc. was granted a court order to end a work slowdown by unionized pilots also working without a contract, which the company claimed forced it to cancel more than 1,700 flights the first 10 days of January. The 11th Circuit US Court of Appeals decision reversed a district court ruling in December rejecting Delta's petition for an injunction against the Air Line Pilots Association, the union that represents the number three carrier's 9,000 pilots.

Screenwriters and Hollywood producers negotiate

Beginning this week, screenwriters and producers will hold two weeks of talks that could determine whether Hollywood will face a major strike this summer. Several unions representing workers in the film industry—the Writers Guild of America, Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television & Radio Artists—have contracts that expire this spring and summer.

On Monday negotiations began between the Writers Guild, which represents 11,000 writers, and the alliance Motion Picture & Television Producers for a contract that expires May 1. The WGA is seeking changes in residual payment formulas for cable programs, for the reuse of TV shows and movies on videocassettes and DVDs, and for shows distributed overseas. Studio executives are determined to hold down costs on residuals, particularly since the contract for 135,000 AFTRA members expired only two months later. The attempt by advertising companies to eliminate the 50-year-old residual payment formula sparked the bitter six-month walkout by TV and radio commercial actors last year.

Talks collapse in Falconbridge strike

After less than three full days of talks, the first since informal negotiations collapsed in November, the Mine Mill/Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union representing the strikers have left the bargaining table, charging the company with playing games when they recently agreed to resume negotiations.

The strike by 1,260 workers at the giant nickel and copper mines near Sudbury, Ontario began August 1, when the union rejected demands for a concessions contract, which the company claimed was needed to stay competitive. The last formal talks collapsed in September and the CAW has since suggested that the actions of Falconbridge demonstrate their plan to break the union at one of the oldest locals in the country.

Falconbridge Ltd. produces about 4 percent of the world's nickel, about 35,000 tons annually, and the latest developments have in fact pushed company share prices up. The facility has continued to operate since the strike began and claims to have maintained output at up to 60 percent of capacity. Expectations for a possible settlement in the strike following the recent appointment of a provincial mediator have been quashed with the union now saying that it may be further protracted in light of the company's apparent unwillingness to bargain seriously.

Toronto teachers begin job action

Eleven thousand public elementary teachers began a work-to-rule campaign last week in protest against the slow pace of contract negotiations with the Toronto District School Board, which has left them without a contract since August 31. This is the latest in a spate of contract disputes between teachers and school boards resulting from the province's new funding formula, which has effectively cut wages and increased workloads.

In what is being called a limited strike, elementary school teachers will withdraw from extracurricular activities, administrative paperwork and replacement duties. There are common issues in this dispute with numerous others across the province this school year, including cuts in education funding and threatened legislation that would compel teachers to take part in extra-curricular activities. Larry Miyata, president of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto (ETT), described the effective cut in salaries that teachers have faced, saying, "In the past 10 years, Toronto's teachers have had a single raise of less than 1 percent, while the cost of living in Toronto has gone up by more than 15 percent."

The action by public elementary school teachers will parallel a limited work-to-rule by 6,800 high school teachers, which has been ongoing since October. These teachers are being threatened with financial penalties if they don't reach an agreement soon. The Toronto Catholic District school board recently ratified its contract with secondary school teachers who had been in strike position since last November. While the deal provides for wage increases of 2.8 percent and some limits on supervisory duties, it is only a one-year contract, which will mean a new round of negotiations this summer.

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