

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2002

Brazil: iron miners threaten strike

Workers at the Vale do Rio Doce mining company are threatening to strike beginning August 1. The workers say that their wages have not kept up with inflation since 1994. The real value of wages having fallen by 13 percent in the last five years alone. Negotiations appear to be at a standstill with the union demanding a 9.5 percent raise and a bonus of 2,500 reales. Vale management's best offer has been 7 percent and a one-time bonus of one thousand reales. The miners at Vale have not been on strike since the 1980s. Vale employs 14,000 workers, who are represented by 22 unions.

In addition to iron, Vale products include aluminum, gold, magnesium and copper. It is one of Brazil's main exporters of metal ore. Consequently, a strike by Vale workers would have a significant negative impact on Brazil's ailing balance of trade, costing about 211 million reales for each week that production is shut down.

Brazil is one of the world's lowest-cost producers of steel, in part because of its huge iron ore reserves, low wages and repeated devaluations of the real. Vale de Rio Doce is currently planning the construction of modern steel mills in Brazil, in partnership with South Korean steel makers.

Highest unemployment in Argentine history

The Argentine Institute of National Statistics (INDEC) announced that Argentina's unemployment rate has hit its highest level ever. Official figures indicate that in May 2002 three million workers—21.5 percent of the population—were unemployed, up from 18.3 percent in October 2001. The report says that in one year 750,000 jobs have disappeared from the economy. In the industrial belts that surround Buenos Aires, Rosario and Cordoba, official unemployment exceeds 24 percent. The collapse of Argentina's auto industry has meant a doubling of the unemployment rate in Cordoba in one year.

The government deems anyone who has worked at least an hour the previous week as employed. About two million workers who are listed as employed hold marginal jobs and are forced to moonlight in the informal sector. Some collect cardboard and bottles, while others sell things in the streets or door-to-door. In addition, nearly half of those listed as having jobs—about 3 million people—earn less than 200 pesos a month (sixty US dollars).

For Latin America as a whole unemployment is on the upswing. A recent report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) indicates that current unemployment for the region is approaching the levels of the so-called lost decade of the 1980s, characterized by stagnation and a hemispheric debt crisis.

Argentina: thousands rally in honor of slain youths

On July 26, 3,000 unemployed workers, students, human rights advocates and residents of Avellaneda marched in honor of Maximiliano Kosteki and Dario Santillan, both executed by the Buenos Aires police during a demonstration of jobless workers on June 26.

The demonstrators held up photographs of Santillan and Kosteki.

The rally included an art festival in solidarity with the unemployed and a silent march from Puente Pueyrredon to the Avellaneda train station where the killings took place during the protest against the government's economic policies. The art festival included a gymnastics exhibition and murals with drawings of Kosteki and Santillan as well as art by Kosteki, who was a sculptor.

Sanctions against Mexican strikers

The government of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas announced the initiation July 29 of administrative sanctions against 3,500 striking health and hospital workers who had completed one week on the picket lines, shutting down clinics and hospitals statewide.

The state secretary of government, Emilio Zebudúa, said that action would be taken against workers who "committed some irregularity, like failing to report to work and blocking the activities of the health centers and administrative units." The government called on the workers to "reconsider their attitude and end the strike."

The workers, who are demanding improved salaries and benefits, have continued to provide emergency services during the walkout.

Dock worker delegates reject contract, call for strike vote

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has postponed talks for two weeks with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) after delegates representing 10,500 West Coast dockers, unanimously rejected a PMA contract offer. The break in talks will allow the union to carry out a mail-in strike vote.

The PMA's most recent offer came on the heels of an ILWU proposal the previous week that agreed to the introduction of new technology that would make certain port jobs obsolete.

In return, the ILWU bureaucracy sought jurisdiction over all remaining work and planning positions on the docks. While management accepted the technology concession, it went on to demand cutbacks in benefits and pensions, and changes in the arbitration process.

The union called management's reaction to its proposal "exceptionally disappointing considering it included the most extensive job concession package since the historic 1962 M&M Agreement that saw massive manning cuts due to the introduction of the shipping container."

Workers, such as clerks who previously handled computer data, would lose their jobs once the ports' computer information system is set up to directly import data from the various transportation companies rather than re-entering it manually. The PMA has agreed to move these clerks to other jobs. However, once those workers retire or quit, those jobs would either be cut or they would devolve to non-union status.

While the PMA claims that "every Longshoreman will continue to have access to 100 percent employer-paid medical care," the agreement would create a two-tiered plan whereby all new employees would be put under an inferior plan administered by a health

maintenance organization.

The two sides are expected to resume negotiations with the ILWU making a new counter-offer. The contract, which expired July 1, will now be extended for the period of the strike ballot. Nevertheless, the National Retail Federation, which imports toys, clothing and shoes from the Asian-Pacific region, has called on President Bush to block a strike should dock workers eventually walk out.

Ohio turnpike workers ready to walk

Toll collectors and maintenance workers on the Ohio Turnpike are prepared to walk off the job by Labor Day unless the turnpike commission comes to an acceptable agreement. A key issue is the deep discontent of part-time workers seeking full-time positions.

The commission pays full-time toll collectors \$18 an hour with benefits, while part-timers receive \$13 an hour and no health insurance, paid holidays or vacations. Further, when full time positions are available, the commission is discriminating against part-time workers by not allowing them to bid on new positions. Instead, management is hiring off the street—and, according to some workers, giving the jobs to friends and relatives.

The Teamsters union is negotiating the contract on behalf of the 900 turnpike workers for the first time. Earlier this year, workers voted to decertify the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America. The old contract expired January 1.

Protesting Hawaiian hotel workers plead not guilty after arrests

Twenty-six Local 5 hotel union members and supporters pleaded not-guilty last week to charges stemming from a civil disobedience protest that blocked the doors to the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Honolulu.

The hotel workers are protesting a bargaining impasse over workload and job security issues. They are also appealing for support from other workers in confronting the bigger issue of globalization in the hotel industry. “Those companies don’t hesitate to use global resources to outdo a small local union,” declared Local 5 senior vice president Hernando Tan. Local 5 is presently negotiating with Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide and Hilton Hotels Corporation.

After the court hearing, workers said they would repeat the protest if necessary. The only person to plead guilty was John Brown, a tourist from Alaska, who said he joined the protest “for unions who seek a minimum wage.” Because Brown wasn’t a Hawaiian resident, he was allowed to pay a \$50 fine and post another \$50 for bail.

Washington State nurses sue over lost breaks

Washington State nurses sued Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup, Washington over the widespread policy of failing to provide adequate staffing in order to allow nurses to take breaks.

Washington State law requires a minimum ten-minute break after a worker completes three consecutive hours of work. Recently, the state Supreme Court ruled against a trucking company that was not compensating its drivers for lost breaks.

The suit asks for the back pay to compensate for all of the missed breaks over a three-year period. Union attorney Liz Ford told the *Tacoma News Tribune*, “What we are looking for is for the nurses to get breaks. We are much more interested in ending the practice.”

The problem arises from the drive by hospitals to maximize profits. Across the country, hospital management has engaged in schemes to compel hospital workers to forego breaks and put in longer shifts in order to maintain operations.

Quebec hotel workers to vote on “unlimited” strike

Some 4,000 Quebec hotel workers, members of various local unions of the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN), staged a one-

day walkout at 18 area hotels on Friday, July 26th. The hotel workers—including doormen, front-desk clerks, laundry workers, waiters and kitchen workers—were demanding a 5 percent wage increase in each year of a three-year contract, as well as improvements in working conditions and job security, including a reduction in workload for housekeeping employees. Most hotel workers receive less than \$14 an hour, including tips.

A settlement has been reached with five Quebec hotels. At the Hilton in Laval, whose agreement is reported to be similar to the other agreements, the three-year contract will include three annual wage increases amounting to only 3 percent, 3 percent and 4 percent as well as more paid holidays, and bonuses for weekend and late-night shifts. At 13 other hotels, 2,200 CSN members will vote to authorize an “unlimited” strike; i.e. a strike of no predetermined duration.

There were already 5,200 Quebec hotel workers (represented by different uncoordinated unions) either on strike or locked out, at the height of the province’s tourist season. They have been joined by a number of employees at Montreal’s Crowne Plaza hotel, who were locked out by the hotel Saturday morning, in the aftermath of Friday’s walkout.

Tentative agreement reached at Stelco’s Hamilton facility

On Friday, July 26, a tentative agreement was reached between Stelco Inc., Canada’s largest steelmaker, and the union representing some 4,000 workers at Stelco’s Hilton Works facility in the east end of Hamilton, Ontario. The workers at the plant, who produce 4.7 millions tons of steel annually, are represented by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), and will vote on the proposal Tuesday, July 30. The present contract was set to expire July 31.

The main demand of the Hilton Works steelworkers was for an increase in the pension provisions to achieve parity with the pension afforded Stelco employees elsewhere. According to union news releases, the proposed agreement provides a 44% increase to the monthly pensions of 30-year employees at the facility. The union bowed to company pressure for a longer contract period (four years).

Air traffic controllers protest working conditions

Twenty-three hundred air traffic controllers employed by Nav-Canada have been holding demonstrations in Montreal and Vancouver to demand better and safer working conditions. The air traffic controllers, who have worked without a contract since March 2001, are protesting staff shortages, mandatory overtime, and unpredictable scheduling of shifts. They are routinely required to perform long shifts for up to ten consecutive days, taking a toll on their personal and family lives, and risking accidents due to fatigue.

The controllers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). The last time the air traffic controllers went on strike was in 1977, when they were legislated back to work and declared an essential service, losing the right to strike. The CAW is currently seeking the right to commence strike action. The Canadian Industrial Relations board is expected to deliver a ruling sometime in the coming week.

The picket lines in Montreal and Vancouver, staffed by off-duty air traffic controllers, have not disrupted service.



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