

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 February 2003

Mexican copper miners strike

A strike by 1,150 copper miners that began January 20 at the Cananea open pit mine is now in its second week. The miners are demanding an overdue productivity bonus, a 5 percent wage increase and an end to contract violations. On January 21, the company—Grupo de Mexico—threatened to shut down the mine and go out of business unless the Mexican government declared the strike illegal. Management alleges that world copper prices are too low to meet workers' demands.

The miners union insists that management violated the contract when it sacked 80 workers at the mine's medical clinic. Ten others were unjustly fired.

Grupo de Mexico is the world's third largest copper producer. Beside Cananea, the company owns two other open pit mines in northern Mexico. The mine, which is in the state of Sonora, 90 miles south of the US border, produces 150 tons of copper annually.

Thousands of striking teachers march in Guatemala City

More than 30,000 teachers marched on Guatemala's capital city January 29 on the tenth day of their strike over wages. The government has threatened to fire the teachers unless they return to work. Sixty thousand teachers in all are on strike.

Four columns of teachers entered Guatemala City and converged at the centrally located Plaza Constitucion. The demonstration was the largest protest since President Alfonso Portillo took office three years ago. The protesters wore black as a symbol of their rejection of the government's intransigence.

The teachers are demanding the education budget be increased by \$422 million to improve salaries, repair and construct schools and provide modern books and teaching materials. Portillo denounced the teachers, claiming the government had reached its limit after three pay raises during his administration. He offered the teachers a 100 quetzal (\$US12) monthly bonus—a fraction of the teachers' demand for a doubling of their current wages. A teacher with 23 years experience earns \$390 a month, the equivalent of a starting salary for a policeman in Guatemala.

Teachers union leader Joviel Gomez said teachers have also reached their limit, after many years of fighting for improved salaries and schools. Gomez said the strike will continue until the teachers achieve their goal. Education Minister Mario Torres indicated January 28 that the government plans to fire 1,000 striking teachers.

Striking public health doctors rally in El Salvador

About 500 striking doctors marched on January 30 in response to the government's announcement that their four-month strike against privatization of the public health care system was now over. Government authorities declared a unilateral end to the strike after taking over clinics that had been occupied by the doctors.

The marchers rallied at the headquarters of the National Private Enterprise Association (ANEP). "We are here to talk to those that are the real rulers of this country," declared Guillermo Mata, leader of the Union of Social Security Doctors. ANEP representatives refused to talk to delegates of the marchers.

The strikers are demanding rehiring and back pay for all doctors involved in the walkout. About 85 percent of the 1,000 public health doctors support the strike, according to union sources. The union plans

another protest on February 6.

Construction workers strike in Peru

Thousands of construction workers mobilized in Peru's capital city on January 28, initiating a national strike to demand better working conditions and collective bargaining rights. The workers, who support the Construction Workers Federation (FPCC), marched with their tools and rallied at the Labor Ministry in Lima.

The workers are demanding the Peruvian Construction Chamber (CAPECO) agree to collective bargaining over wages and working conditions. Construction workers are currently paid by the job, not by the hour. While the law in Peru recognizes collective bargaining rights for construction workers, in practice CAPECO ignores them. CAPECO leaders have ignored Labor Ministry requests for negotiations mediated by the government.

Workers currently earn about 720 soles (about US\$200) a month, less than half the amount considered the minimum income needed by a family in Peru. The workers are also demanding health benefits, pensions, job security and vacation pay.

There are 320,000 construction workers on strike, paralyzing about 2,000 construction projects.

Argentine unemployed demand subsidies

Thousands of unemployed workers marched on the Ministry of Social Development and Labor in downtown Buenos Aires and other major cities in Argentina last week demanding an extension of jobless benefits to workers who are not heads of household and to those older than 60 years old. Protesters also demanded that the government take over the operations of bankrupt factories that are currently being occupied by workers. Currently, unemployment in Argentina is estimated at about 18 percent of the labor force. Twenty million of a population of 36 million are living in poverty. Those receiving subsidies are not counted as unemployed.

A huge column of workers and their families marched on Corrientes Street, completely blocking Buenos Aires' financial district. Currently the subsidy to heads of households consists of a monthly government bond valued at 150 pesos (about US\$45).

United reorganization plan to target workers

UAL Corporation, the parent company of United Airlines currently under Chapter 11 bankruptcy, announced a \$1.5 billion loss for the fourth quarter of 2002, bringing its overall losses for last year to \$3.21 billion. The loss comes on top of what was a record \$2.1 billion loss in 2001.

The announcement came at the end of last week as CEO Glenn Tilton began to unveil to board members the company's strategy to return the carrier to profitability at the expense of its workers. A United spokesman characterized the meeting as "unanimous in its support for the need for fundamental transformation of the airline."

On the eve of the meeting, Air Line Pilots Association leader Paul Whiteford denounced early leaks of the plan as a proposal to "break up United Airlines by giving United routes, aircraft and other assets to another company—with a whole set of new managers and employees."

According to the *Chicago Tribune* and other papers, United plans to establish a discount carrier that would utilize a lower tier of pay for pilots and flight attendants. These two employee groups would have their ranks

further reduced by up to 25 percent. In the case of pilots this would shrink their numbers from 8,000 to about 6,000. Pilots would also be expected to increase their per month flight hours by 28 percent.

Ratification vote ends lockout at Michigan carton company

Workers at Graphic Packaging Corporation (GPC) in Kalamazoo, Michigan ratified a five-year agreement January 26, bringing a six-month lockout to a close. The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) International Union anticipates the 429 workers will return to their jobs within the next two weeks.

Graphic Packaging Corporation locked out workers from its mill and carton manufacturing operations on July 27, 2002. The company demanded mandatory overtime of up to 20 hours a week, a requirement to work all holidays, a two-tier pension system and revisions in the attendance policy.

Terms of the final settlement were not available. In a PACE press release Region Nine Vice President Bill Gibbons stated, "No one is pleased with the contract" and alluded to the new conditions that GPC intends to impose on its workforce, citing "onerous overtime provisions."

During the lockout, a replacement worker was killed on a conveyer belt when a 2,000-pound bale fell on him. Management insisted the worker was properly trained and consequently responsible for his own death. The Kalamazoo plant is one of 17 GPC packaging operations owned by the notoriously anti-union Coors family, which is associated with beer processing.

Pennsylvania hospital locks out nurses

Some 400 nurses were locked out of Wilkes-Barre General Hospital in Northeastern Pennsylvania over the weekend. The lockout came in the wake of a two-day strike called by the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals after employees rejected management's last offer.

The two sides were unable to resolve issues involving salaries, staffing and mandatory overtime. The strike is also motivated by the accumulated experience nurses have had since the 1992 merger of two hospitals under the parent Wyoming Valley Health Care System. Management embarked on questionable expansion projects largely financed through attacks on employees' living standards.

Carolyn Gazowski, a former nurse, told the *Associated Press*, "They kept taking more and more and more away from us. They took away our clothing allowance, our Christmas bonus. They took away our birthday holiday. They had money for imported marble and this and that and the other thing, but they didn't have money for their workforce."

The hospital says the lockout will go on for eight days due to the fact that 200 strikebreaking nurses had been contracted for 10 days. The nurses union had given notice for a second two-day strike on February 9 should management not resolve contract issues.

Labor Department attack on overtime and family leave provisions

The Bush administration is preparing changes in the nation's labor law that will exempt companies from paying overtime to certain workers. In the past, certain employees coming under salary, management and administrative responsibilities might be determined ineligible for overtime.

Calling the overtime standards antiquated, the labor department is seeking to widen the classification to include jobs that require "intellectual" skills and training. Backing the measure are employer groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, who complain the many "well-paid" professional workers are required to get overtime pay. The employers are also worried about a surge in overtime pay litigation and seek to disarm the threat.

Besides the overtime issue, the Labor Department also wants to alter the 10-year-old Family Medical Leave Act which grants most workers 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child or a serious health condition of the employee, parent, child or spouse. Employers want

to restrict leave to employees only on the grounds of serious health conditions.

Washington State considering ban on teacher strikes

The Washington State senate is examining a proposal that would outlaw strikes by state teachers. The measure, Senate Bill 5155, would be activated under conditions where a strike or lockout occurs or is about to occur. If a union should fail to comply, a fine of up to \$10,000 per day could be imposed.

The bill is being sponsored by Democratic State Senator Tim Sheldon and Republican Joyce Mulliken. Sheldon is also pressing for a second bill that would bar the use of sick leave or payment of salary during a work stoppage.

On January 14, some 25,000 teachers and their supporters walked out of classes during a "day of action" to lobby the legislature to reject Democratic Governor Gary Locke's plans to call a halt to education spending initiatives.

Province-wide healthcare protests in British Columbia

British Columbia's non-clinical hospital workers, including laundry workers, housekeepers and food services workers, staged a province-wide day of protest against the Liberal provincial government's assault on health and social services. The January 28 protests were timed to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the Campbell Liberals' Bill 29—the Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act—which allows hospitals to privatize work done by non-clinical workers.

In Vancouver, more than 1,000 hospital workers, along with 2,500 supporters, participated in a march to the Plaza of Nations. In Victoria, six people were arrested for participating in a peaceful occupation of the hallways of the Vancouver Island Health Authority. Protests were also scheduled in Prince George, Kelowna and Nanaimo. The media reported that some teachers in the province expressed their solidarity with the hospital workers by wearing all black in the classroom.

Hospital management has asked the Labour Relations Board to rule that the protests constitute illegal strike activity, and has indicated a desire to prosecute workers involved in the protests. According to Tony Collins, vice president of the Health Employers Association of BC, "There may be some employees who are disciplined by their institutions as a result."

The workers, represented by the Health Employees' Union (HEU), currently earn an average wage of \$19 per hour and face massive job losses and wage cuts as a result of the privatization campaign. The union has reportedly indicated it would accept a less generous contract if layoffs were avoided.

Ontario health workers to hold day of protest

Workers at 40 provincial hospitals will hold a day of protest February 13 against the Ontario Hospital Association's failure to bargain in good faith with their union, the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU). The 5,170 workers include technologists, pharmacists, social workers and workers employed in many other capacities by the hospitals.

The workers are demanding a centrally negotiated agreement at the 40 hospitals. They are also demanding wages for registered technologists on par with those received by nurses. This would amount to an overall wage increase of 25 percent.

Toronto teachers vote for strike mandate

Toronto's 11,000 public elementary school teachers—without a contract since last September—have voted 96.3 percent in favor of a strike mandate. Leaders of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto have indicated that a work-to-rule campaign would precede any full-scale strike. The teachers are demanding a 9 percent increase in wages over two years.

The Toronto District School Board has offered approximately 2 percent for the next year, with no increase in the subsequent year. The school board is currently being run by a provincially appointed supervisor because the elected trustees had refused to pass a balanced budget to protest the Tory provincial government's cuts to education funding.

Negotiations are proceeding or pending between teachers and 20 other school boards across Ontario. Durham region teachers are presently engaged in a work-to-rule action.

Editorial staff at *Toronto Sun* join union

Editorial staff at the *Toronto Sun*—a tabloid long known for its right-wing tirades and opposition to unions—have voted to join the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild. The Sun Media chain was bought by media giant Quebecor in 1999 and, since that time, a great number of layoffs have been implemented. The *Sun*'s editorial staff cited job security as their main reason for unionization. Of 165 reporters, 82 voted in favor of joining the union, while 33 voted against.



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