Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Miners protest in Bolivia

Thousands of Bolivian miners, members of various miners cooperatives, blocked highways for three days last week in Bolivia, demanding the government allocate $600 million to help reactivate their industry. The protest began on June 23, when thousands of miners cut off major routes with protests. One miner, Severino Macias, was shot and killed during a confrontation with army troops that were trying to open a highway.

The blockades were lifted on June 26 once the government agreed to assign $2 million to an economic development fund and to compensate Macias's relatives.

Costa Rican educators continue strike

On June 24 teachers in Costa Rica demonstrated in San Jose to demand the government resolve their grievances. The educators have been on strike for more than a month.

The teachers are demanding a pension plan that pays teachers 100 percent of their salaries after 30 years on the job. The government of President Abel Pacheco insists it will not negotiate with the teachers unless they give up their present pension demands. The government has also threatened to fire the striking teachers.

Oil workers strike in Colombia

On June 27, 5,000 Colombian oil workers walked out in protest over plans to reorganize and partially privatize the national oil company, Ecopetrol. The oil workers union (USO) intends to stage permanent vigils at every Ecopetrol facility for the duration of the strike.

The Uribe administration plans to break the oil company into two parts. The National Hydrocarbon Agency will be in charge of exploration contracts with private companies and Ecopetrol SA will oversee production and marketing. The company's shares, now in the government hands, could be sold to private investors in the future.

In anticipation of the strike, Colombian army troops took over the nation's main refinery at Barrancabermeja on June 21.

Protests by Social Security employees in Panama

On June 26 employees of the Social Security Fund (CSS) in Panama declared a strike to demand increases in wages and improved medical benefits for the public. The strike call followed three days of demonstrations in Panama City. Street protests resulted in several workers being injured from confrontations with the police.

Experts have warned that CSS is heading toward collapse in the next few years without new infusions of funds. This year the CSS deficit is US$80 million.

Argentine workers mark anniversary of Pueyrredon bridge massacre

On June 26 more than 20,000 workers and unemployed marched over Pueyrredon Bridge, which links the city of Buenos Aires with the working class suburb of Avellaneda, to commemorate the first anniversary of the executions of jobless protesters, Dario Santillan and Maximo Kosteki, in the course of a police riot.

The demonstration demanded an investigation and punishment of those behind the killings, which occurred during a march of unemployed workers to demand jobs. In addition to Dario and Maximiliano, 33 others suffered wounds from live ammunition. Over 100 others were injured by rubber bullets.

Alberto Santillan, Dario's father, spoke to the crowd about the example his son gave in life by volunteering to fight for the poor. Dario was fatally shot as he was attending Kosteki's wounds. Others gave testimony that described the methodical manner in which the police carried out the massacre. Organizers of the event blamed the Duhalde government, the International Monetary Fund and the US government for being politically responsible for the crime.

Kosteki was an aspiring painter. His work was exhibited on June 28 in Grissinopoli, an occupied factory that has been transformed into a cultural center.

Washington State carpenters strike

About 4,000 carpenters in western Washington State were called out on strike June 25 by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners union over the failure to come to an agreement with the Associated General Contractors on health care issues.

Union negotiators wanted a total of $2.40 in wage increases during the first two years of a five-year agreement that could be diverted to pay the cost of health care. They also demanded the authority to apply future wage increases to health care costs as needed. The head of the employers group, Roland Dewhurst, insists, "The central issues are the future of the economy and the spiraling cost of health insurance."

Overall, the contract covers some 8,000 carpenters. The old agreement expired May 31 and was extended twice before the union called a walkout last week. The present strike has affected 125 job sites, including the $72 million Everett Regional Special Events Center, slated for opening in

September.

Kentucky uranium plant workers end strike

Workers at the Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Paducah, Kentucky ended a nearly five-month strike June 26 against the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC), the country's only plant that enriches uranium for nuclear power. Leon Owens, president of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Local 5-550, did not divulge the terms of the new agreement and only commented that it passed by a "sound majority."

Workers originally struck USEC when the company offered a five-year contract with annual wage increases of 1.7 percent, 3 percent and 3.5 percent thereafter. USEC also sought to hike health insurance premiums for workers by 10 to 12 percent in the first year and a 19 percent increase in the contract's final year. The union attempted to base their proposal on an agreement obtained by workers at the Miamisburg, Ohio nuclear plant, where a four-year agreement resulted in annual wage increases of 3.5 percent, a 10 percent pension hike and a 10 percent cap on employees' share of health insurance costs.

Workers were angered by USEC's managers, who receive six-digit salaries, and company CEO William Timbers, who made $2.5 million in salary, bonuses and stock options last year.

Lockout at Tennessee truck plant ends

Workers at a Peterbilt truck plant in Madison, Tennessee voted 470 to 90 to accept the company's final offer and end a 10-month lockout. United Auto Workers Local 1832, which represents the workers, did not comment on the new agreement.

The Peterbilt plant, owned by Paccar, locked out the 750 workers on September 3, 2002. A week earlier the company sent layoff notices to 500 of the workers in response to a drop in truck orders. Only 250 workers will return to work on July 1. According to management, the new five-year contract helps Paccar "control the ever-increasing cost of healthcare."

Chicago Hotel workers strike

Some 130 workers at Chicago's Congress Plaza Hotel went on strike June 15 to protest wage and benefit cuts and demand that hotel management agree to a contract that mirrors the agreement between the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 1 and 28 other Chicago hotels, which was settled last year.

On May 14, the Congress Plaza cut wages by 7 percent and stopped paying monthly health care premiums, resulting in the elimination of coverage for workers. Housekeepers now earn a mere $8.21 an hour, compared to their counterparts at other Chicago hotels, where the minimum is $10 an hour.

Striking Labatt's workers reject company's offer

In Montreal, 950 workers at the West End distribution center of Labatt's Brewery have rejected the company's most recent offer. The workers have been on strike since June 16 and have been without a contract since December 2002. A major issue in the strike is the large number of workers classified as temporary workers.

The rejected seven-year contract offered to create only 20 new full-time positions and included a wage increase of only $4 per hour spread over the full duration of the contract.

Wal-Mart workers in Thompson hold certification vote

On June 27, 130 workers at the Wal-Mart in Thompson, Manitoba held a vote to certify the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) as their bargaining agent. If successful, the certification drive will be the first unionization of Wal-Mart workers in North America.

According to the UFCW, more than 50 percent of the workers voted to join the union. Examination of the ballots has been postponed, however, until the Manitoba Labour Relations Board rules on Wal-Mart's claim that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had interfered by taping footage of the voting process.

Workers unionize at Kingsville mushroom factory

An overwhelming majority of the 270 workers at Rol-Land Farms Inc. in Kingsville, Ontario have signed cards to certify the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) as their bargaining agent.

The Ontario Tories' Bill 187, passed in November 2002 and euphemistically entitled the "Agricultural Workers Protection Act," gave farm workers the right to form "associations." However, these associations are prohibited from striking and employers are not required to recognize them as sole bargaining agents. Although the UFCW has claimed to be defying this antidemocratic legislation, the union bureaucracy offered the employer a no-strikes-or-lockouts policy in exchange for voluntary recognition.

Working conditions at the Kingsville mushroom plant are reportedly appalling and include non-stop 12-hour shifts, the nonexistence of overtime pay, safety problems, piecework wages and "gag orders" prohibiting workers from conversing in their native languages.