

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 August 2003

Brazilian VW workers stage walkout

Some 5,000 Brazilian Volkswagen workers struck for two hours at the Taubate plant, west of Rio de Janeiro, to protest the company's threat to cut thousands of jobs. The company handed out letters to 3,993 of its Brazilian employees announcing they would be transferred September 1 to a new unit the company is creating. The company, Autovisao Brazil, is supposed to be, in the company's terms, an "incubator" for creating new jobs, denying that the move represents a job reduction.

Workers in Taubate will meet this week to discuss strike action. In São Paulo de Campo, 15,000 VW workers will also discuss strike action this week. VW says it must restructure because its sales are down 8 percent this year.

Chilean copper strike postponed

Union leaders at the Escondida mine in Chile, the largest copper mine in the world, postponed a threatened strike after the company reportedly made an improved wage and benefit offer. An August 6th date has been set as the deadline for a final agreement.

Last week, workers at the Escondida mine rejected management's wage offer. Of 1,260 workers who cast ballots, 98 percent voted to strike, according to the union.

The company offered a 1.5 percent pay increase while the union demanded 3 percent and other benefit increases. Escondida is partially owned by multinationals BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto PLC. A strike would disrupt global supplies at a time when copper inventories are declining.

Unions call off threatened strike as contract expires with Verizon

Unions representing 78,000 workers called off a threatened strike August 3 after the contract with telecommunications giant Verizon expired. Negotiators for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) claim progress is being made in ongoing talks. Verizon management, however, is continuing to press demands for greater flexibility to lay off workers, subcontract work and impose increased health care costs on its workers. The company has cut 15,000 jobs since 2000 and is looking to slash another 5,000 positions by the end of the year.

A walkout would affect service in Washington, D.C., as well as New York and 12 other eastern states, from Maine to Virginia. The company has made plans to use current and retired managers and contractors in the event of a strike. CWA

and IBEW officials say a walkout is still possible, but they are relying on the intervention of a federal mediator to reach an agreement. The union bureaucracy has expressed its willingness to collaborate in further downsizing at the company if management agrees not to fight their efforts to organize 20,000 workers at Verizon Wireless.

Meanwhile, 150 Verizon workers remain on strike in North Carolina. The walkout, which began May 19, is over management demands for increased forced overtime and flexibility in cutting jobs and subcontracting work.

Nevada governor threatens long-term pay freeze

Nevada governor Kenny Guinn announced in a press conference last week that state workers, teachers and university faculty could go without any pay-raises for six to eight years. The state faces a \$200 million shortfall in its next biennial budget in 2005 due to the phasing out of the estate tax and the loss of a one-time federal grant that propped up the 2003 budget. The state also failed to pass a business tax that would have provided additional revenue.

"If we had the money, I would have liked to [give raises] because it's going to be a long spell before state employees, school district employees and university people get another raise," said Guinn. "A long time. I would say six to eight years without a doubt. These are difficult times."

Workers will receive a 2 percent raise in 2004 but it will be offset by even greater increases in premiums for health care and retirement. Labor leaders had little to say. Jim Richardson, lobbyist for the Nevada Faculty Alliance, said he was "puzzled" by Guinn's statement. Scott MacKenzie, executive director of the State of Nevada Employee Association, said his union would "take a wait-and-see" approach.

Workers strike Michigan paper mill

Paper workers at the Domtar paper mill in Port Huron, Mich., went on strike against the Montreal-based company after union and management deadlocked over health insurance issues. The US paper industry continues to come under pressure from international competition, complicated by high natural-gas prices, and has targeted its workforce for concessions.

The 194 members of the Paper, Allied Industrial Chemical and Energy Workers International Local 51 are bitter over the company's hard line in the negotiations. "It stinks," 28-year veteran mill worker Bob Glyshaw told Gannett News Service. "We worked hard, did everything they wanted us to do—and they promised us a pleasant surprise on our next contract." No

new talks have been scheduled since the walkout.

Workers at Catholic treatment center in New York unionize

An overwhelming majority of the 80 direct care workers at the Cantalician Center for Learning in Buffalo, N.Y., voted to unionize under the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees. The workers, who treat severe cases of mentally retarded and developmentally disabled patients at the Center for Learning's workshops and residential homes, earn about \$7 an hour.

Jeanna Evans, one of the center's workers who spearheaded the union drive, told the local radio station, "I'm hoping we can move forward. We want management to respect us. We just want to care about our jobs again." Workers are in the process of forming a bargaining committee to negotiate with the center. Cantalician Center executive director Sister Mary Patricia Tamasik refused to comment on the matter.

Budget cuts force Massachusetts's lawyers to refuse court-appointed clients

The Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS) in Bristol County, Mass., admitted that more than a third of the 160 private lawyers who normally accept court-appointed clients for the county are refusing to do so. The action came after the CPCS announced last July 18 it had run out of money.

The crisis stems in part from Governor Mitt Romney's decision to cut \$15 million from the CPCS bar. The state has only 115 full-time public defenders working for the CPCS, leaving 90 percent of its cases to be taken by private attorneys who are paid \$30 an hour. But the hourly fee fails by a wide margin to cover attorney's office fees. A considerable number of attorneys are already owed tens of thousands of dollars for past work with no prospect to collect.

While attorneys are barred from striking, there is little dispute that the action is coordinated. "Most of us who do it, we love doing trials. We love helping people in dire straits," attorney Brian Roman told the *Taunton Gazette*.

Grocery chain workers locked out in British Columbia

Four-thousand-seven-hundred cashiers and grocery clerks employed by Calgary-based retail food giant Canada Safeway Ltd. were locked out by the company late last week after their union delivered a strike notice. Forty-nine retail outlets in the lower mainland and Fraser River Valley are affected by the action.

The workers are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which turned down the company's latest offer just before giving strike notice. The company had been seeking a deal with no wage increase for six years, and the latest offer contains mostly lump sum payments with wage increases of less than 35 cents an hour. The union is seeking annual wage hikes of around 55 cents an hour, retirement bonuses and improved benefits for senior workers.

At least 1,200 unionized workers not affected by the current lockout, including meat and bakery workers, will also be idled,

and their union has said they will join the picket lines. Any deal reached with Safeway will be looked to as a pattern settlement by its competitors, the largest of which are also currently in contract negotiations with the UFCW.

Settlement at Canada Post

After postponing three strike deadlines over a two-week period, a tentative four-year deal was reached late last week between postal employees in the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and Canada Post Corporation, the state-owned mail service. Both sides hailed the deal as a victory, claiming that significant concessions were won.

The 48,000 workers affected by the deal had been without a contract since January of this year, but their union was intent on resolving the dispute without a strike—this despite workers delivering the largest strike vote in the union's history in June. Along with improvement in wages and benefits, the union hailed a new agreement bringing 6,000 rural and suburban contractors under union jurisdiction for the first time. The union also cited more "flexibility" in working conditions, which will save the company money.

Full details of the contract will not be made public until union members have a chance to vote on the proposed contract. A ratification vote won't be held until the end of August and will take at least a month to complete.

Maritime ferry workers on strike

The ferry connecting Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia was halted by a strike Saturday in an action by 14 officers against the recommendation of their union, the Canadian Merchant Service Guild. Although a tentative contract had been reached in June (the two sides had been in negotiations for months), the workers refused to ratify it over the issue of wages. Ferry service has been halted indefinitely, but travel can still be made on the Confederation Bridge, which connects the two provinces.

Alberta blood service strike ends

Eighty workers on strike since July 17 returned to work last week despite the union's failure to win improvements in key areas of working conditions. Members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the strikers who collect and distribute blood in Calgary and Lethbridge, have been without a contract since April 2002. While the union has vowed to continue fighting for improvements, the strikers are returning to work with only modest wage gains.



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