

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 December 2003

## Chilean copper miners strike

Nine hundred Chilean miners struck the Andina copper mine—owned by Coldeco, the world’s largest copper producer—in northern Chile December 5. The vote the day before was nearly unanimous, with only six workers opposed. Afterwards the miners marched into the city of Los Andes. The miners are asking for a five percent raise, while the company that owns Andina offered an increase of 1.4 percent and the elimination of yearly bonuses to the miners, a net increase of one percent.

Codelco controls 20 percent of world output, with mines in Mexico and Chile. The Andina mine produces 1.6 million tons of copper, about 14 percent of Chile’s total. Up until this month world copper prices had been depressed due to a glut in copper inventories, which stood at 1,370,000 tons, well in excess of the normal inventory of 800,000 tons.

On November 29 Codelco announced that it would reduce copper sales by 200,000 tons, in an attempt to bolster the price, but it would continue production, adding to the existing inventories. The announcement of the strike coincided with a sudden increase in copper prices, due mostly to the fall in the value of the US dollar, the currency used to price copper in the international market.

## Chilean doctors on strike

Hundreds of Chilean public health doctors went on a 24-hour strike December 3. The doctors are protesting the government’s plan for changes in public health. The changes would further ration health care, by prioritizing 56 health conditions over others.

Doctors point out that indigent patients would be forced to wait longer than at present. They also say that the changes would result in a cut in their wages. Seventy-five percent of Santiago’s 6.6 million inhabitants use public health hospitals because they have no access to private insurance. There are 3500 public health doctors in that city.

## Uruguayan newspaper workers back on the job

Workers at the Montevideo daily *La Republica* returned to work December 2 after 12 days on strike. The workers had occupied the paper’s offices. Under the agreement, management will rehire two fired workers. Seven others will be given a severance package.

*La Republica* editorials represent the views of the left-leaning political coalition “Frente Amplio,” and it is owned by Federico Fasano, an Argentine capitalist who also owns two radio stations and a cable TV channel.

## Colombian truck drivers on strike

Protesting increasing road tolls and the price of fuel, 90,000 Colombian truck owner-operators launched a national strike. The government responded by organizing caravans of non-striking drivers under military protection. One hundred twenty thousand truckers operate in Colombia.

The strike began on December 1 and ended on December 6. The Colombian Truck Drivers Association (ACC) called the strike, demanding a freeze on fuel prices and road tolls, a 10 to 14 percent

increase in hauling rates and the withdrawal of draft legislation that would have retired trucks that are more than 20 years old, a measure that would have affected 87,000 trucks.

The agreement ending the strike included promises by the government that it would intercede with major coal shippers for an increase in hauling rates. It also agreed on a temporary freeze on the imposition of new highway tolls and the construction of new tollbooths. Existing tolls will be allowed to increase at the rate of inflation.

The Colombian daily *El Tiempo* reports that Colombian owner operators are frequently forced to be on the road for 17 or 18 hours at a time in order to make ends meet. In addition to low hauling rates, and legal tolls, truck drivers often have to bribe officials and paramilitary and guerrilla forces. They have to turn over up to five percent of their checks to cashing agents, often associated with the same companies that pay them.

## Amtrak protest strike ended by judge

A federal district judge ordered 600 Amtrak workers back to work December 5 after a two-day walkout at the national rail service’s Beech Grove, Indiana maintenance facility. Workers from both the Transport Workers Union and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees objected to the escalating use of outside contractors to repair rail cars and tracks while union members remain furloughed. Some 11 other rail unions supported the action.

The US government has systematically dismantled Amtrak, a part of a consistent drive to complete the privatization of the national passenger rail service.

In September, Amtrak management brought in a contractor to repair fences around the facility. This was followed by the arrival of a track-maintenance contractor in November and a rail-repair contractor last week.

The unions charge management failed to notify them of the use of contractors, as required by their contract. Judge Larry McKinney ruled the strike illegal and ended it while ordering expedited arbitration over the issue.

## San Francisco shelter workers protest low wages

Workers in San Francisco’s homeless shelters walked off their jobs December 4 to protest low wages and insufficient city funding of the agencies that provide support to the homeless population. Workers are demanding a three to five percent increase in the \$10.40 an hour average wage for some 540 shelter workers represented by the Office & Professional Employees International Union Local 3.

Workers are calling on the city to increase funding to the nonprofit organizations that operate shelters by \$475,000 to provide for the increased wages. The office of San Francisco’s Democratic mayor Willie Brown has called the proposal “unrealistic” and shrugged off the problem, saying the non-profit agencies are responsible for workers’ wages.

Darius Dayhan, director of the Housing and Homeless division for

the Department of Human Services, attempted to play off shelter workers against the very people they serve by saying, "The only solution, if we agree to the increase salaries per the current proposal, would be to decrease services." The California Self-sufficiency Standard has established \$10.75 an hour as the minimum wage needed for a worker in San Francisco to meet basic living requirements in the city, which has among the highest housing costs in the nation.

#### **New York workers strike Grand Central restaurant**

Seventy members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 100 went on strike December 5 against the Oyster Bar, located in New York's Grand Central Terminal. While the three-year agreement put forward by management offered a full benefits package, workers rejected it on the grounds it imposed a lower pay rate for new hires and compelled them to pay 25 percent of their health benefits.

The restaurant hired seven "permanent" replacement workers in order to continue its operations. Restaurant manager Michael Garvey announced, "Anybody who went out on strike today will have to reapply for their jobs. I will not displace someone that's working here now."

#### **Government orders reduced pension benefits for Teamsters**

Federal administrators of the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund sent out notices December 1 announcing cuts in the rate at which Teamsters members will earn new benefits beginning in 2004. The effect will be that some 400,000 workers will only earn one percent of what employers contribute to the fund as opposed to the past rate of two percent.

The Central States Pension Fund, which is the second largest union pension in the United States, has suffered heavy losses. From \$21 billion in 1999, the fund fell to \$15.3 billion at the end of 2002, while then managing to creep back to its present level of \$17.1 billion. Administrators blamed the three-year bear market and the increasing ratio of retirees to presently working Teamster members for the fall.

A fund expert called the management of the fund as "squeaky clean" in an attempt to fend off accusations of corrupt practices by J.P. Morgan Chase Inc. and Goldman Sachs, who are the court-appointed fund managers. The fund was placed under government operation in 1982, using a campaign against mob-control to cloak a drive against workers' living standards.

#### **Health workers join Quebec protest action**

Unions representing 65,000 health care workers in the province announced they would be joining the growing protest movement against proposed anti-labor legislation introduced by the Liberal government of Jean Charest. Union leaders have warned that the new measures will destroy public health care in Quebec.

The Liberal Premier, who took office last spring, has pledged to implement legislation that threatens to wipe out thousands of public sector jobs and broaden the drive to privatize health care and other social service sectors. A key issue in the dispute is proposed changes to labor law that would allow employers to bypass union contracts by farming out work to private employers. A further measure would halve the number of bargaining units in the health care sector, thereby lowering terms of employment and ripping up seniority provisions for thousands of workers.

Labor leaders have announced plans for a province-wide day of protest on December 11, which could see thousands more join the movement against government attacks. Claudette Carbonneau, head of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), representing over a quarter of a million workers in the province, has appealed to the

government to slow down legislation and encourage 'democratic' debate. Last Tuesday Henri Massé, head of the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), condemned the occupation of a Montreal hospital, saying it was "a little out of place."

#### **Grocery chain lock-out ends in Newfoundland**

A three-week strike/lock-out by 1,600 workers at the giant grocery chain Dominion Stores came to an end last week when workers narrowly ratified a new contract. The workers had been locked out by the company in November following a round of rotating strikes.

Terms of the new deal include wage increases totaling only \$1 an hour over three years, a voluntary retirement package and a drug plan for a small number of part-time workers. The Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), which represents unionized workers at Dominion Stores, asked members to accept the new contract despite the paltry increases, citing threats by the company to close all its stores in the province if the contract wasn't passed.

#### **Taxi strike gearing up in Ottawa**

With the collapse of contract negotiations last week, 50 taxi dispatchers in the national capital region could be on strike as early as New Year's Day. Three of the largest companies in Ottawa would be affected. Since the union representing taxi drivers has indicated they would respect picket lines, a walkout would effectively shut down taxi service to the entire city.

Taxi dispatchers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and are in a contract dispute with Zip Track, the parent company that operates the three cab lines affected. The dispatchers, who are seeking increases to bring them in line with typically low-wage call center workers, make an average of \$11 an hour for full-time workers, which the union says is only \$3 an hour more than they were making twenty years ago.

#### **BC ferry workers walk out**

Members of the British Columbia Ferry and Marine Workers' Union walked out last week to oppose concessions, including management demands to increase workers annual hours, while cutting their hourly pay between 6 and 48 percent. In addition to the measure that would result in the slashing of hundreds of jobs, management is also demanding the unfettered right to contract out work. Management pressed ahead with its demands despite the efforts of the BCFMWU leaders to offer virtually complete scheduling flexibility to the company.



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