

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 May 2004

Latin America

Miners occupy Bolivian tin mine

Over a thousand miners in the city of Colquiri, Bolivia, took over the Colquiri tin mine last week in a peaceful occupation. On May 10, the miners expelled management from the mine and took control. They are divided into shifts to ensure the safety of the machinery and dynamite stored in the facility.

The mine is state-owned and operated by COMSUR Company, which is owned by former president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. The workers are demanding the Bolivian government of Carlos Mesa rescind the contract with that firm.

This is the second occupation of a mine operated by COMSUR. The Caracoles mine was occupied the week before. The government fears that other occupations will follow this week.

Though the Bolivian territory is endowed with mineral wealth, its exploitation has never benefited the miners. During good times, profits flow out of the region. When prices are low, thousands are laid off with little government assistance. In 1986, a collapse in tin prices led to the sacking of more than 23,000 miners and the closure of marginal mines. The unemployed miners responded by organizing cooperatives that help miners to eke out a living by going over the rock left behind by the mines, looking for ore in rivers and in exhausted mines, and then using primitive low-productivity techniques to free small quantities of tin from the ore. Nationwide, 55,000 miners belong to those cooperatives—1,500 in the Colquiri region.

These were later reopened under contract with private industry. COMSUR employs 500 workers and pays them about US\$120 per month. Rising tin prices that have resulted in windfall prices for COMSUR and the other private contractors sparked the current wave of protests by employed and unemployed miners.

Brazilian autoworkers strike

Twenty-five hundred workers at the San Jose dos Pinhais Volkswagen plant in Parana state went on strike on May 10. At issue are wages and working hours.

The strikers are demanding that the working week be shortened from 42 to 40 hours. They are also calling for an

increase in profit-sharing bonuses. VW management offered a bonus of US\$860 to end the strike. Workers will meet this Tuesday to consider the offer.

Oil strike continues in Colombia

The three-week-long strike of oil workers at two Colombian refineries still shows no signs of resolution. Leaders of the oil workers union (USO) and the state-owned oil company (ECOPETROL) met on May 16 but reported no progress.

Four thousand workers are on strike against plans to rationalize the production and refining of oil in preparation for the privatization of the company. USO is also demanding that the company agree to rehire 200 workers who were fired by management in retaliation for the strike after Colombian President Alvaro Uribe declared it illegal. Among the fired workers is the leadership of the USO.

Venezuelan government steps in to end steel strike

To end a 20-day strike of steel workers against Sidor, the largest steel mill in Latin America, the Venezuelan government headed by President Hugo Chavez agreed to pay US\$6.2 million to subsidize bonuses and improvements in working conditions for the workers.

The subsidy will be handed out directly to the workers. At the same time, the Chavez administration proposed handing control of the government-owned shares in Sidor directly to the unions there.

Sidor, formerly a state-owned company, is operated by the Amazonia Consortium, which owns 60 percent of its shares. Mexico's Hylamex, Brazil's Usiminas, and Venezuela's Sivensa own the consortium. The balance of the shares, 40 percent, is in the hands of the Venezuelan government.

United States

Two-day strike ends at Owens Corning plant in South Carolina

Three hundred workers at an Owens Corning plant in Anderson, South Carolina, ratified a new three-year contract after two days on the picket line. Members of the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Workers International Union Local 15 went on strike May 11 after the company put forward a contract that froze wages, banned overtime, cut bonuses based on years of service, and more than doubled the amount workers must contribute toward

insurance premiums.

Under the new agreement, workers will still not receive wage increases, but instead a one-time US\$500 bonus will be issued. Insurance premiums will increase for workers, and bonuses and sick pay will still be based on seniority.

Under the new agreement, the union consented to the loss of eight jobs held by workers in the plant's building and grounds department. But no further details were available about the company's desire to build a "super furnace" at the South Carolina facility. It is estimated that the expansion would close the plant's other two furnaces and result in the wiping out of nearly half of the union jobs.

Washington State farmworkers overexposed to chemicals

Nearly one quarter of farmworkers who handle pesticides and are being monitored in Washington State are believed to have been overexposed to hazardous chemicals, based on blood samples analyzed by the state's Department of Health. The state began testing on some 2,265 workers who handle organophosphate and carbamates that are used to control insects that attack the state's orchards and croplands.

Results of a second testing of blood on 345 of the workers indicate that 82 may have been overexposed. The tests on 20 workers were considered so alarming that immediate recommendations have been made that they cease working with the chemicals.

Organophosphate and carbamates are nerve poisons that lower the blood levels of an enzyme called cholinesterase, which aids in the regulation of the nervous system. Overexposure can lead to symptoms of dizziness, respiratory problems, involuntary muscle twitching and even paralysis. The testing program only came about after 10 years of litigation by the United Farm Workers union. David Dalman, an environmental health professor at the University of Washington who assists in the blood test evaluation, said he was "surprised by the frequency" of those who tested for overexposure.

Racial incidents at Tennessee Goodyear plant

The Obion County Sheriff's office has begun an investigation into several racial incidents at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. plant in Union City, Tennessee. In one incident, Marshall Brown, a black machine operator, found a noose hanging in his area along with a threatening racist letter. Brown, who is on unpaid leave from his job, told the Associated Press, "I just don't feel safe in there."

A second incident involved a note using a racial epithet and threats that was inscribed on the bottom of a desk drawer. A third situation involved Willie Thomas, a black janitor, who reported on three separate occasions in which a toilet was clogged and racial epithets were written on the walls ordering him to clean the toilet.

Iowa construction strike winds down

The last section of striking building trades workers in Des Moines, Iowa, voted over the weekend whether to accept a new tentative agreement, as the 13-day strikes by five separate construction unions halted building projects, including the US\$32 million public library and the US\$62 million Science Center of Iowa.

Contracts covering eight unions and 300,000 workers expired on April 1. Ironworkers and drywall finishers walked out the following day, followed later by bricklayers and operating engineers.

Canada

Casino Windsor strike ends

In Ontario, the strike by 3,500 Casino Windsor employees, represented by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), ended on May 13 after 41 days.

Workers voted 93 percent in favor of a new four-year deal that includes a pay raise of 50 cents an hour the first year and 40 cents an hour each of the following three years. In addition to signing bonuses, there are some improvements in working conditions, benefits and job protection provisions. Negotiations had resumed with a government-appointed mediator after the previous offer had been rejected. The initial demand by the casino was for a pay increase of C\$1.15 per hour for three years.

Winnipeg crane operator strike

Fifty Winnipeg crane operators, members of the Operating Engineers of Manitoba union, went on strike May 7 after negotiations with a group of contractors broke down. Issues in the dispute include wages, benefits and back pay. The employers involved in the dispute are general contractors, industrial mechanical contractors and rental contractors.

"The last time we negotiated, we negotiated for over a year before we got a new agreement," said union spokesman Jim Murphy. "The contractor would not pay retroactive pay, and we said we would not be doing that again. That's why we're taking this job action, because every day, every week that we go without a collective agreement, the members are losing money—and that is the same for every trade."



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