

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 May 2004

Latin America

Venezuelan steelworkers in third week of strike

Thousands of Venezuelan steelworkers are in the third week of a strike against the biggest steel mill in South America, the Siderurgica del Orinoco (SIDOR). The strike is pitting the workers against management and the Venezuelan government.

Both sides are appealing to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to intervene on their behalf. Plant management and regional industrialists are demanding that the strike be made illegal, while union officials want the government to renationalize the plant, which was privatized in 1996. To that end, the union has threatened to begin a national petition campaign for a referendum on the status of the plant.

Chavez has sided with the plant management, sending the National Guard to surround the plant and protect the scabs. On May 5, National Guardsmen used tear gas against workers who were blocking the scabs from entering the plant. Picket lines of striking workers are preventing the shipping of material in and out of the plant.

In December 2002, workers at SIDOR refused to join the US-backed campaign of strikes and right-wing demonstrations to force Chavez's resignation. The strike began on April 30, following a week of partial stoppages. The union is demanding profit-sharing bonuses from 2003, more money for, and improvements in, the company's health plan, and the rehiring of 200 fired workers.

Clashes in Argentine province of San Luis

On May 6, 10,000 protesters clashed in the central city of San Luis, capital of the Argentine province of San Luis, with a gang of government supporters, while police stood idly by. The march was called to support San Luis's teachers, who have declared an indefinite strike against draft legislation that would abolish laws that regulate schools, demanding that San Luis's governor resign.

The May 6 march in solidarity with the teachers included supporters from other cities in Argentina. On April 30, police attacked a teachers' protest with tear gas and rubber bullets, wounding more than 30 demonstrators.

Doctors on strike in the Dominican Republic

Ten thousand public health doctors struck May 6, demanding a 100 percent raise. Dominican President Hipolito Mejia called the strike politically motivated and refused to negotiate with the workers until they ended their walkout. "This is blackmail because it is taking place in an electoral season," said Mejia,

who is running for re-election. Voting will take place on May 16. The doctors plan to strike again between May 11 and May 14.

Mejia had promised doctors a 30 percent raise. The doctors rejected the offer and appealed to Congress for 100 percent. Mejia intimated that he would veto such a proposal. High levels of inflation have reduced the buying power of doctors' salaries to \$300 per month.

Oil workers' strike continues in Colombia

The strike of workers against the state-owned company Ecopetrol in Colombia is now ending its third week. The refineries at Barrancabermeja and Cartagena are surrounded by police riot squads and military units.

Last week, Gabriel Alvis, president of the Workers Sindical Union (USO), and 20 union officials were fired in a blatant union-busting attack. The USO accuses Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and Ecopetrol of attempting to impose working conditions that leave workers vulnerable to layoffs as part of their preparations for privatizing the oil company.

Costa Rican banana workers protest use of pesticides

A three-day protest by banana workers in Costa Rica ended in a preliminary agreement with the government to compensate workers and their families whose health was damaged by the use of a harmful pesticide. Twenty workers had gone on a hunger strike May 3, saying they were prepared to starve themselves to death. Four of them were already under hospital care when the agreement was signed.

The workers are demanding compensation for physical damage caused by Nemagon, a chemical that was sprayed on banana plants between 1967 and 1979. The spray was banned when it was discovered that it provoked skin lesions and impotence in men. The government agreed to pay 300 women and 1,200 men \$3.4 million.

Teachers strike in Honduras

More than 60,000 Honduran teachers went on strike for 24 hours on May 5 to protest the government's plans to privatize education. Hundreds of teachers surrounded and occupied the Department of Education in Tegucigalpa. Other protests took place in cities across Honduras.

Education Minister Carlos Avila denied that the government had any plans to privatize the system. Avila accused the striking teachers of being "education terrorists." This was the eighth teachers strike this year in Honduras.

United States

Texas chemical workers end strike

About 150 workers at Sterling Chemical's Texas City plant voted May 7 to end a five-day strike and return to work after the company agreed to resume negotiations with the union. The strike erupted May 3 after the company insisted on a clause in the new three-year contract that would allow it to replace members of the Texas City Metal Trades Council with less experienced non-union contract workers.

The expired agreement allowed Sterling to hire non-union contractors to do bargaining-unit work provided no union member got laid off. "That single proposal could wipe out the union in three years," said Metal Trades Council President Ruben Hernandez.

Sterling Chemical's senior vice president of manufacturing has declared, "In this country, we can't guarantee those guys jobs any more if other people can do their work for less money." The new three-year agreement includes a 3 percent pay increase for some workers and \$1,500 lump-sum increases for others.

New York Access-a-Ride drivers end strike

About 1,000 transit drivers ended their strike May 6 when Local 1181 of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) accepted a contractual offer that gives its members a 2 percent retroactive raise and a 4 percent hike for each year of the next three years. The old contract expired September of last year. However, there is currently no public information as to the more contentious issues involving the drivers' demands for a guaranteed 40-hour week and company contributions to their health and other benefits.

The drivers work for four out of the eight companies in the Transit Authority's (TA's) Access-a-Ride program that provide door-to-door service for disabled riders. About half of the 8,000 passengers who require this service have been affected since the strike began April 22. The TA had urged all affected riders to take taxis and promised to reimburse them later.

Massachusetts gas workers end nine-month walkout

Some 63 workers for the Massachusetts natural-gas utility company Berkshire Gas voted over the weekend on a new five-year contract after nine months of picketing. United Steelworkers Local 12325 declined to provide details of the new agreement.

Workers first walked out in April 2003 over company demands for a two-tier pay scale, increased health insurance contributions and a clause that spouses of workers be required to obtain health insurance through their employers. Subsequent negotiations also brought the two sides into conflict over minimum staffing levels.

Workers returned to work in January under the previous expired contract agreement. During the dispute, the National Labor Relations Board, while reviewing unfair labor practices charges, determined that the work stoppage was an economic strike. Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training,

which disburses unemployment benefits, called the conflict a lockout by Berkshire Gas. The dispute idled workers in Pittsfield, North Adams and Greenfield.

Trailer manufacturer locks out workers at two Indiana plants

Talbert Manufacturing locked out 87 workers at its Rensselaer, Indiana, plant and another 10 workers at a smaller plant in nearby Francesville on May 3. Members of United Steelworkers Local 6982, comprising welders, painters, machinists and maintenance workers, rejected a revised contract offer on May 2. No new negotiations have taken place since that time.

Talbert posted a sign outside the plant Monday morning that told workers "not to report to work until further notice or until a new collective bargaining agreement is in place...." Local 6982 President Tony Hopkins called Talbert "a very profitable company."

Canada

Workers strike Brewers Distributor, New Westminster

Three hundred workers at British Columbia's Brewers Distributor Ltd. (New Westminster) have been on strike since May 1. The workers are demanding increases to wages and pension benefits, having received none since 1997. They are also protesting the company's reliance on seasonal labor instead of full-time hiring. The workers are represented by Local 300 of the Brewery, Winery & Distillery Workers' Union.

The British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) has advised its members not to remove beer empties, work normally performed by the striking workers.

Mental health workers could strike

Thirty-five workers at Mental Health Services in Hastings and Prince Edward County could commence strike action as early as May 11. The workers, including clerical and support workers, case managers and community support workers, are represented by the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 455. They work with people with severe mental illnesses and are demanding improvements to wages, vacation entitlement, parental leave, premium payments for benefits, travel reimbursement and job security.

Talks, in progress since November, broke down between the union and the employer on April 13, and the workers subsequently voted 97 percent in favor of strike action. A last-minute bargaining session is scheduled for Monday, May 10.



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