

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 June 2004

Latin America

Bolivian teachers, miners in struggle against Mesa government

Striking teachers and tin miners escalated their struggle this week over wages and jobs, blocking roads leading to Peru and Brazil. Thousands of teachers mobilized and marched in La Paz, rejecting a \$12-a-month raise, while teachers in northern Bolivia barricaded highways out of the country.

Meanwhile, scores of Bolivian tin miners in the southeastern part of the country occupied rail lines, which are the only means for shipping tin and silver out of the Antofagasta mining region.

Teachers, who have been on strike for about a month, seized the vice minister of education, Celestino Choque, and held him at a union office in downtown La Paz. The teachers detained Choque during a meeting of the top leaders of the union, which was trying to decide whether to send the teachers back to work this Monday.

In La Paz, three sticks of dynamite exploded inside the headquarters of the government-owned Bolivian Mining Co. (COMIBOL), causing damage to the lobby of the building. Miners are demanding the right to work tin mines in the remote Campo Grande region, where several have been closed due to the collapse of world tin prices. Now that tin prices have shot up, mining companies and miners' cooperatives are demanding the mines reopen. About 200 miners set up camp in La Paz, demanding jobs at these mines.

Following the miners' protest actions, COMIBOL agreed to temporarily hire about 220 protesting miners.

Sugar workers protest over the use of slaves in northeastern Brazil

A recent press release by Brazilian labor unions entitled "Sugar with the taste of blood" chronicles repeated violations of human rights by the giant sugar monopolies in Brazil. It claims much of the recent increase in sugar production has been based on the use of slave labor, employing methods damaging to the ecology of the region. The increased sugar production is being driven by the improvement in automobile engines designed to use alcohol as a fuel.

These accusations were detailed last week in Recife, State of Pernambuco, in northeastern Brazil, at a meeting of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT.) At the meeting, labor representatives from across the sugar-producing areas that include plantations in Pernambuco, Alagoas, Ceara, Bahia, Marnhao, Sao Paulo, Minas de Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, Mato Grosso do Sul and Parana, described conditions on the plantations.

The document reveals the consolidation and takeover of small plantations by monopolies that use the violent methods of organized crime to repress the workers. "Civil war conditions

exist, with many executions, kidnappings, persecution, the use of torture and massacres. Men are forced to work virtually around the clock during six months out of the year," the press release stated.

The crisis is compounded by the closure of sugar plants due to technological change that, in some areas, have left thousands of workers unemployed.

In São Paulo, where 61 percent of the sugar and alcohol are produced, the use of advanced technology goes hand in hand with the use of slave labor, which is used to ensure high rates of production. To assure themselves of raw material, the groups that control the distilleries have extended their power over the plantations themselves. In turn, these companies have taken advantage of dire drought conditions in parts of Brazil to entice workers into slavery. The Recife conference demanded that plantations using slave labor be confiscated by the government.

The report also points out that the expansion of the industry has brought about grave environmental consequences. In Matto Grosso do Sul, the environmental impact includes many cases of children being born without brains and increasing levels of cancers, from the use of toxic chemicals and the pollution of rivers.

Peruvian iron miners' strike

Seven hundred and eighty-one workers at Shougang Iron Peru began a strike of indefinite duration on June 2. The company stands to lose \$270,000 a day from the work stoppage. Most of the iron at the mine is exported to China, the world's leading producer of steel.

The miners of the subsidiary of the Shougang Company, owned by the Chinese government, are demanding an increase of 7 soles (\$2.05) to their daily wage of 41 soles (\$12). Management has offered 1.5 soles. The strikers point out that other mines in the area pay as much as 62 soles (\$18) for the same work.

A union official said that health and safety conditions inside the mine are also an issue.

United States

Indiana Visteon workers strike against company's transfer of equipment

More than 1,000 workers at Visteon's Bedford, Indiana, plant struck when the company began to remove equipment shortly after the contract with the International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) expired at 12:01 a.m., May 30. Members of IUE-CWA Local 907 voted down the company's final offer on May 28. The union leadership was then dealt a series of rebuffs by Visteon—first when it offered to extend negotiations, again when it offered to extend the old contract, and a third time when it pledged to ask workers to keep working without a contract.

Within minutes of the expiration of the old contract, the

company began loading FDM (fuel delivery module) equipment onto trucks and moving it off the plant. IUE-CWA official Jim Clark admitted the union was aware of the company's threat to transfer production, but complained, "Visteon vastly accelerated its timeline on moving the FDM equipment." The company had already announced it would cut 600 jobs from the plant in May and was seeking extensive cuts as well as attempting to push a higher percentage of health care premium costs and co-payments for medical services onto the backs of workers.

Wisconsin bricklayers strike

Bricklayers for 80 contractors in Milwaukee and surrounding counties walked off the job June 1 after the old agreement covering 525 members of the Bricklayers and Allied Craft Workers Local 8 expired. Both union officials and negotiators for various contractors' associations were scheduled to continue bargaining.

Few details about contract issues have been made available other than the fact that workers are insisting on larger wage increases to counter the higher cost of health care insurance. Bricklayers are believed to be insisting on increases above the 4 percent that carpenters and cement finishers agreed to.

Bricklayers last struck back in 1976. The present walkout immediately began causing construction delays at various projects, including the \$34 million Waukesha County Jail.

Workers at Baltimore hospitals call strike

Some 2,500 workers at three Baltimore hospitals will launch a two-day strike starting June 8 to protest management's refusal to move on wage increases. The strike, which would involve maintenance workers, secretaries, housekeepers and other staff members, will affect 400 workers at GBMC, 250 at Sinai and 1,500 at Hopkins hospitals.

Under current proposals by hospital management, health care costs are scheduled to rise by 25 percent over the three-year contract period. Workers are demanding increased pay to offset those costs. Service Employees International Union 1199E-DC reports that some of its members are eligible for food stamps because they are so poorly paid.

Florida union official convicted of taking payoffs

The president of south Florida's 7,000-member National Federation of Public and Private Employees was convicted June 2 of taking payoffs from companies in return for calling off unionization drives or barring larger national unions from establishing a foothold. Walter J. Brown was found guilty on charges of racketeering, conspiracy and fraud, and is expected to serve a prison term of less than eight years when sentencing comes up on August 18.

Brown was accused of pocketing nearly \$500,000 from eight companies during the 1990s and was accused of spending union dues on expensive restaurants, junkets and cars. His sister, Patricia Devaney, also served as a union employee and was convicted on similar charges.

Canada

Strike by Toronto road workers

More than 2,000 road workers in Toronto have been on strike for two weeks fighting changes in overtime rules. The contractors are trying to change work rules in order to compete with nonunion

contractors. As things stand, the workers receive overtime pay for any day they work more than 10 hours, for any Saturday, or for any week of more than 50 hours. The contractors are seeking to limit overtime pay to weeks of more than 50 hours.

The workers are represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 793, the Universal Workers Union Local 183 and Local 230 of the Teamsters. Talks, under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, are to take place this week.

Strike at Michelin tire plant in Kitchener

One thousand workers at the B.F. Goodrich tire plant in Kitchener, Ontario, are on strike against demands by their employer for a 15 percent reduction in labour costs. The company, a component of French-based multinational Michelin, reportedly told union negotiators that the plant needed to become competitive with facilities in Asia and eastern Europe. The workers, on strike since May 31, are represented by Local 677 of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA).

Second attempt to organize workers at Thompson Wal-Mart

One hundred forty workers at the Thompson, Manitoba, location of Wal-Mart have voted for a second time on whether to join the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Although the results have yet to be announced, it could lead to the first union contract at a Wal-Mart in North America.

One year ago, a certification drive failed by a small margin at the Thompson Wal-Mart. More recently, in another narrow vote, workers at the Jonquière, Quebec, location voted against joining the UFCW. Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, relies on low labour costs and has waged a long-standing campaign to prevent workers in its stores from organizing.



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