

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 June 2004

Latin America

Peruvian government steps in to resolve iron miners strike

Striking iron miners at the mine owned by Shougang Iron Peru rejected an agreement negotiated by their union leaders prompting management to declare an impasse, setting the stage for Peruvian authorities to intervene in the negotiations.

The strike began over the miners' demand for a monthly wage increase of 7 soles (about US\$2) a month. Union leaders and management agreed to an increase of 2.90 soles and a one-time bonus of 570 soles (US\$160). The workers rejected the offer as insufficient.

Peru's labor ministry is expected to present its own proposal this week, which is widely expected to be very similar to Shougang Iron's latest offer.

A company spokesperson said the company considers it impermissible for a miner to earn more than white-collar employees. Given current wage scales, "no worker may earn more than an employee; it would be illogical," he declared.

Shougang Iron's mine, located 600 kilometers south of Lima, is highly profitable. The company is a subsidiary of a Shougang, owned by the Chinese government. Most of the output is exported to China.

Sixty thousand Honduran teachers on strike

Over 60,000 primary and secondary school teachers in Honduras initiated a series of escalating strikes June 8. The strikes will expand over the coming days to all of Honduras's 18 departments. This is the ninth strike this year by Honduran teachers.

If their demands are not addressed the teachers plan to protest by barricading streets and marching across the country.

One of the teachers' main demands is payment of back wages, on which the government is 10 years in arrears. The total cost of the teachers' demands would be US\$22 million.

President Ricardo Maduro has declared the government cannot afford that amount, and is suggesting a

reorganization of Honduran education. According to government figures, the Honduran educational system loses US\$1.3 million each day the strike continues.

Education experts consider the Honduran educational system the most backward in Central America. In comparison to Costa Rica's system, it is 25 years behind the times.

24-hour strike against Petrobras in Brazil

Oil workers in Brazil carried out a 24-hour work stoppage against the state-owned oil company, Petrobras. The workers are demanding that the company carry out its side of a collective bargaining agreement arrived at last year.

The strike affected the company's 13 refineries, oil terminals and other facilities in the states of Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Amazonas, Paraná, São Paulo and Rio Grande do Norte.

In Rio de Janeiro, workers rallied at the Duque de Caxias refinery. The United Federation of Oil Workers (FUP) is threatening another strike on July 5 if the issues are left unresolved.

United States

Iowa Maytag workers strike

Workers at Maytag Corporation facilities in Newton, Iowa, rejected a contract negotiated between United Auto Workers Local 997 and management at the appliance maker known for the manufacture of washing machines. Union President Pat Tweed declined to disclose contract details, but among the issues is the company's demand that the 1,525 workers shoulder a greater portion of health care costs.

Maytag CEO Ralph Hake has declared that production costs at the Newton plant are too high. He cited in particular benefits for current workers and retirees. Hake praised a contract the company reached with Hoover workers in North Canton, Ohio, that gutted work rules and implemented a new health plan, "as a model for preservation of jobs."

Maytag began in Newton in the early part of the last century. Today it is a US\$4.7 billion international

corporation that includes among its products Hoover vacuum cleaners and Amana refrigerators. One out of ten of the town's 15,600 inhabitants work for the company. Before the strike, some 700 workers were on layoff. Maytag announced recently that several hundred salaried workers would be terminated under a new restructuring plan.

New Jersey: Nurses strike Bergen Regional Medical Center

On June 2, about 420 nurses and other hospital staff at the Bergen Regional Medical Center in Paramus, New Jersey, one of the state's largest hospitals, struck after negotiations between the hospital and the union broke down. The Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) union is demanding a higher nurse to patient ratio, increased pension funding, higher wages, and a two-year rather than a three-year contract.

The hospital prepared for the shortage in staff by "starting a major recruitment drive," offering \$10,000 signing bonuses. It found over 100 replacement nurses, whom the union contends have not been adequately trained and therefore increases risks for patients. The union has arranged with the state officials for workers to receive unemployment insurance during the strike. This is only allowed because the hospital has said that its work has not been affected.

Two weeks earlier, HPAE workers in six New Jersey hospitals voted to strike. The union said that 90 to 98 percent of the members voted to strike in each case. In all cases, except at the Bergen Regional Medical Center, the union reached an agreement with management. This has left the workers at Bergen Regional isolated from the general struggle of hospital workers and made them dependent on federal mediators and possible arbitrators. The union wanted to hire an arbitrator, but management refused. According to the HPAE web site, the union was "waiting for the Federal Mediator to call the parties back to the table."

Bergen Regional Medical Center was a chronically underfunded government run hospital under the authority of Bergen County until county politicians privatized it in 1998. Under the 1998 contract, the company, Bergen Regional Medical Center LP, pays the county \$6 million in rent, but it receives \$9 million for a monthly management fee. In addition, the company gets to keep all the profit they make from their monopoly on health services. The first five years of the relationship between the county and the company were marked by numerous lawsuits.

This changed in 2003, when Democrat Dennis McNERNEY took control of the county executive's office. For the previous three years, the company and its affiliates had given hundreds of thousands of dollars to Democratic organizations that put McNERNEY in power. As a result, the county dropped its lawsuits against the company, among them claims that the company had illegally avoided hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales taxes. Since 1998, Bergen Regional Medical Center LP has reduced the number of registered nurses on its staff by about 40 percent, from 425 to 240.

Canada

Group Home workers on strike

Twenty-seven employees of Deer Park Villa social service agency in Ituna, Saskatchewan, have been on strike since June 3. The workers are fighting for union recognition to compel their employer to recognize job seniority in determining promotions and overtime calls. Deer Park Villa operates three group homes and several other facilities providing services for adults with mental and physical challenges.

The striking workers are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4552. After failing to achieve a first contract after a year of bargaining, 82 percent of the local union members voted in favor of the strike on May 3.

Strike looms for Sudbury hydro workers

Eighty-two inside and outside workers at Greater Sudbury Hydro Plus, a city-owned power generation utility in Sudbury, Ontario, could go on strike as early as June 19. Conciliation talks have failed after management refused to withdraw a list of 21 concession demands, including the elimination of retiree benefits. The board of directors, appointed by local councilors, is demanding the concessions even though 23 jobs have been cut from the utility since deregulation in 2001 and workload has increased substantially. The workers, who are members of CUPE, have already voted 93 percent in favor of a strike.



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