

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 July 2004

Latin America

Mexican oil workers demand jobs

Oil workers threatened on July 2 to block access to the oil port of Dos Bocas in the state of Tabasco if they are not given work.

The demonstrators, representing 600 oil workers laid off 12 years ago, rallied in front of the Union of Petroleum Workers of the Mexican Republic (STPRM) in Villahermosa and then marched to the port of Dos Bocas, where they issued a warning to the union and to the employers that they had 24 hours to comply with their demand for work.

The sacked workers won their jobs back in court. The union, however, Section 50 of the Oil Workers Union of Mexico, refuses to give the workers the work cards that they need to go back to work.

About 80 percent of crude oil from Mexico's southern oilfields is exported through Dos Bocas.

Farmers and fishermen are blocking other Pemex installations in nearby Centla protesting company plans to drill for oil in an ecologically sensitive region. That protest began on June 29.

Argentine Central Bank employees on strike

For the second time in several weeks, employees of Argentina's Central Bank walked out July 2 to press their demand for a wage increase. The strike is to last through July 7.

The walkout paralyzed financial activities at the Central Bank, whose officials were considering the declaration of a bank holiday on July 5.

Teachers strike in Peru leads to violent confrontations

Rioting broke out in the southern city of Ayacucho, Peru, as a result of confrontations between striking teachers and their supporters with the city's police. The confrontation began July 1 when security forces attempted to force striking teachers from the Education Ministry, a building they had occupied for eight days.

According to official reports, 48 people were wounded and 15 protesters arrested. Union leaders said that two strikers were killed, but government authorities deny that report. In the heat of the struggle, several buildings were damaged, including the regional government building, which was occupied by protesters.

Though the confrontation had signs of a police provocation, Carlos Ferrero, chief of staff of the government of Alejandro Toledo, accused the protesters of being manipulated by the Shining Path guerrilla movement. The government's charge provides a pretext for further repression of the striking teachers.

Ferrero's accusation was repudiated the next day when hundreds of students that support the teachers marched through the streets chanting: "We are students, not terrorists." Following the student march, striking teachers also marched in repudiation of Ferrero, chanting: "Ferrero, liar! We are not terrorists!"

The strike by Ayacucho teachers began June 21. The teachers are demanding a formal contract for 1,000 temporary teachers, a wage increase and the abrogation of legislation that would lead to the privatization of Peru's public education system.

The Ayacucho strike is led by a dissident faction of the Union of Peruvian Education Workers (SUTEP), led by Roberto Huyanalaya. In Lima, SUTEP leader Olmedo Auris blamed the followers of Huyanalaya for the violence.

Airport strike in Peru

July 1-2 airport employees in Lima conducted a 48-hour walkout to oppose plans to privatize the nation's airports.

Sergio Salazar, leader of the airport workers union, declared: "The government is mocking us," charging the government of violating a March agreement that led to the suspension of an earlier strike deadline.

Puerto Rican postal workers threaten strike

On July 1, Davis Rios, president of the American Postal Workers union in Puerto Rico, threatened to organize a walkout if management insists on hiring only temporary and part-time employees, instead of full-time career workers at the island's post offices.

Rios reported that there are 340 unfilled vacancies in Puerto Rican post offices. He linked the lack of hiring to the introduction of automatic letter readers to accelerate the pace of the postal workforce without hiring more employees.

Union sources have declared that they may introduce a motion for a nationwide job action in early August at the American Postal Workers convention in Long Beach, California.

United States

Iowa Maytag workers end strike, ratify new contract

Workers who manufacture the popular Maytag washing machines at the company's plant in Newton, Iowa, ratified a four-year contract by an undisclosed margin on July 2, ending a nearly four-month strike. The new agreement will pay the 1,500 workers a \$500 to \$600 cash payment every six months during the first three years of the contract, followed by a 2.5 percent increase in base salaries during the fourth year.

However, workers will have to pay 10 to 20 percent of health care costs along with a deductible. There will also be a premium cost and a higher prescription co-payment. Under the old agreement, the company had covered most costs in the health care package. Workers who retire by 2008 will be covered by the health-care package in the previous contract. New hires will find themselves denied the company-paid pension plan and instead forced into an inferior 401(k) plan.

Labor Board ruling orders reinstatement of Utah miners

The National Labor Relations Board issued a ruling last week requiring fired miners at the C.W. Mining Company in Huntington, Utah, be allowed to return to their jobs after being essentially locked out for nine months. Last September, 75 workers at the company's Co-op mine were fired after appealing to the United Mine Workers for help in an effort to unionize the operation.

An election to unionize the mine will be held in August. The UMW and a company union, which has existed at the mine for several years, will be on the ballot. The stooge union is staffed by management officials who are members of the polygamous Kingston family that owns the mine.

On July 6, workers plan to march to the company's office to demand their jobs back. Workers will return to work under the abysmal pay standards that preceded the work stoppage of \$5.25 to \$7 an hour with no benefits. The NLRB's decision also included a back pay order whose details have yet to be worked out.

Hawaiian tugboat workers strike

On July 1, about 60 tugboat workers struck Young Brothers Ltd.-Hawaiian Tug & Barge, the company responsible for most of the archipelago's inter-island barge traffic, causing immediate shortages of a wide variety of goods and food. The impact of the strike was made greater when about 50 members of the longshoremen's union failed to show up for work.

At issue is the tugboat workers' demand for accumulated time off. Presently workers receive four hours of accumulated time off for every day they go to sea. The union had demanded that the figure be doubled to eight hours over the course of a new four-year agreement, charging that they

often work 24 hours a day for as long as three days at a stretch doing dangerous and hard labor. The company would only agree to six hours.

As the contract expiration drew to a close, the union said they would agree to six hours providing Young Brothers would boost pay. But the company refused and negotiations broke off.

Canada

Warfield public works employees vote to strike

Public works employees in the village of Warfield, British Columbia, voted June 23 to go on strike in order to protect job security, as more and more of their jobs are transferred to private contractors. On June 1, the village contracted out garbage pickup and yard and garden maintenance to a private company based in Victoria. Mediation has been scheduled for July 21. The workers are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2087.

Ten-year tentative agreement in Alberta schools

The union representing Alberta's teachers has reached a tentative agreement with the Alberta School Board Association for a 10-year contract. In exchange for the unprecedented length of the contract, teachers would receive pension funding, the creation of 2,500 new jobs and a provincial salary grid. Prior to the agreement the government had issued an ultimatum that it would rescind its offer of funding the teachers' pension liability (\$1.8 billion) unless an agreement was reached by Wednesday. The tentative agreement is separate from the contracts between teachers and their individual employers. Strike action remains possible in a number of Alberta school divisions.

Talks off at Iron Ore Company

Talks broke off Friday between the 1,400 workers at Iron Ore Co. of Canada (IOCC) and the Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railway and their employer. IOCC—a component of transnational Rio Tinto—had tabled demands for concessions from the workers that would amount to \$10,000 per worker per year, including reductions in wage and overtime rates and the elimination of some benefits. The workers are represented by Locals 9344, 5795 and 6731 of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) and will be in a legal strike position 15 days after a conciliator's report, which is expected this week.



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