

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 August 2004

## United States

### Montana city officials back down, rehire workers fired for honoring city strike

City workers in Billings, Montana finally ratified a new three-year contract after the city relented and rehired 16 nonunion workers who were fired for honoring picket lines during an 11-day strike. The 350 members of Teamsters Local 190, who provide bus service, garbage collection and work for the library, walked out August 5 over seniority, longevity pay and wages.

During the course of the strike, three probationary workers and 13 seasonal workers were fired for honoring picket lines. When the union leadership brought back a tentative agreement on August 13, a section of the union refused to ratify the contract without the rehiring of the 16 workers and the contract was defeated by a 169 to 107 margin.

### Caterpillar workers again reject contract

Some 9,000 members of the United Auto Workers agricultural implement division at seven Caterpillar plants in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Colorado and Tennessee have rejected the company's latest contract offer and were told to report to work August 16. The UAW provided no details.

Workers angrily rejected Caterpillar's previous offer back in April when the company attempted to substitute lump-sum payments in place of raises, implement a two-tier wage structure with starting wages of \$10 an hour and make workers pay for healthcare premiums for the first time.

The April offer came on the heels of what *Business Week* called "blockbuster first-quarter results" of record profits amounting to \$412 million.

## Latin America

### Public health strike in Nicaragua

Thousands of public health employees went on a 48-hour strike August 19 in Nicaragua to protest low wages and lack of supplies in the nation's public

hospitals.

Tania Quezada, a spokesperson for the Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD), reported to the Associated Press that despite attempts by management to intimidate the strikers, the strike was observed by 95 percent of the membership.

FETSALUD is demanding an increase in the public health budget to be evenly split between equipment and supplies and wages. Another walkout is planned for October if these issues are not addressed by the government of Enrique Bolaños.

### Teachers strike in Brazil

Teachers in the state of Rio Grande do Norte went on strike August 16 after rejecting a government offer on wages and promotions. Union of State Education Workers (SINTE) declared that the offer was vague and did not commit the government to anything.

### Rally in support of Argentine ceramic workers

Over 5,000 workers and students rallied in the city of Neuquén August 20; at the same time, hundreds of workers met in a Buenos Aires auditorium in support of the Zanon ceramic workers. The workers took over the Zanon plant in February 2002 to prevent its closure and the sale of its machinery, and are now attempting to operate the plant as a workers' cooperative. The plant is located in the province of Neuquén.

Throughout these two years the workers have continued production while fighting off attempts to evict them from the plant. The ceramic workers have attempted to obtain legal recognition for their cooperative "FASINPAT" (Spanish contraction for "factory with no bosses"). Instead, the Neuquén authorities plan to evict the 400 workers currently employed and transform the plant into one that makes building materials, allegedly as part of a public home construction scheme. The new plant would employ only 250 workers, with no guarantee of permanent jobs.

The protest rallies resolved to defend the Zanon occupation and to fight for legislation that would

legalize the expropriation of plants that have been occupied by their workers. Another mass mobilization is planned for September 10.

### **Volkswagen workers strike in Mexico**

Workers at the VW plant in Puebla, Mexico ended a two-day strike on August 21. The workers had rejected an offer that included a wage increase of 4.45 percent and a raise in benefits of \$88 per month. The workers rejected the offer despite the union's recommendation.

The VW union forced an end to the strike when the company offered to marginally increase the wage offer to 4.5 percent and a 1.6 percent increase in benefits in negotiations with Labor Ministry officials.

Originally the union had demanded an 8.5 percent wage increase and a 4.5 percent increase in benefits.

The Puebla plant employs 9,500 workers and produces the popular "Beetle" model, which is exported to the United States and 80 other countries. It is scheduled to begin producing a new "Golf" model for sale in the United States.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, last year, Volkswagen's net profit fell to 1.1 billion euro (\$1.4 billion), compared with 2.6 billion euros in 2002, with sales rising a slim 0.2 percent.

### **Former braceros march in Tlaxcala**

Nearly 1,000 former braceros marched in Tlaxcala, Mexico, to demand that their forced savings be returned to them. The braceros, from the Spanish word for arm, were agricultural workers sent by Mexico to the United States between 1940 and 1960. The workers were paid by their American employers, but 10 percent of their wages were sent to Mexico as a forced saving. There has never been an accounting of the money and it was never returned to them. The money was first deposited in the Wells Fargo Bank of San Francisco and allegedly sent to the Bank of Rural Credit in Mexico.

The demonstration marked the first anniversary of the National Congress of Former Braceros (ANB), which represents the approximately 10,000 agricultural workers that were part of this program.

### **Canada**

#### **Wildcat strike by Halifax longshoremen**

On August 21, 140 longshoremen working at the Port of Halifax went on a one-day wildcat strike in reaction to the firing of a fellow worker the previous Friday. According to the general manager of the Halifax Employers Association, the longshoreman had been

fired for taking part in two previous "illegal work stoppages." Although the strike ended the following day, the outcome of their action is still not clear.

### **Vancouver airport strikers stage picket**

Six hundred fifty employees of Flight Kitchen in Richmond, British Columbia, near Vancouver, set up picket lines August 18 seeking a fair contract. The strikers include cooks, bakers, galley builders and drivers who perform cleaning and maintenance duties. They had voted 68 percent in favor of a strike the previous Monday, rejecting a settlement offered by a mediator that included a two-year wage freeze, a two-tier wage system and job reclassification schedule. The workers, members of UNITE HERE!, have been without a contract since the beginning of August.

The mediator had been hired after the workers rejected the offer of the employer, Cara Airline Services Division, which demanded an overall wage cut of \$2 per hour. The employer claims that the offer was a result of pressure by Air Canada, which is in the midst of restructuring for cost-cutting of \$17 million. Currently, the starting pay for workers is \$9.72 an hour (Canadian).



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