

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 September 2004

Latin America

Peruvian copper miners on strike

Fifteen hundred miners employed by Southern Peru Copper Corp. struck for higher wages and benefits on August 31, shutting down two of Peru's most profitable mines. Workers at the Toquepala and Cuajone mines in the Southern Andes of Peru stopped work at the ore-processing facilities attached to the mines. Non-union subcontractors are not trained to replace them.

Both mines have an annual capacity of 350,000 tons of copper and their closure is affecting copper prices worldwide. On the first day of the strike, copper futures increased from \$1.06 per pound to \$1.26. Peru is the fifth-largest copper producer in the world.

Initially, the miners were demanding an 8 percent raise to about \$24 per day, plus a cost-of-living clause to keep up with Peru's inflation rate of 4 percent a year. The strikers also demanded housing and health benefits. The union indicated its willingness to settle for less.

Management rejected the workers' demands as "unjust," claiming that the miners are under a six-year contract that will not expire until May 2007.

Mexican public health workers protest attacks on their pensions

On September 1, employees of the Social Security Institute in Mexico staged a one-day national strike to protest changes in their pensions. In Campeche, more than 1,700 workers joined the strike, together with workers in Merida and most major cities in Mexico. In Yucatán, communications employees of the Telmex telephone company joined the walkout in solidarity with the health workers.

In the State of Michoacán, more than 11,000 medical workers and their supporters marched to back the health workers.

Telmex leader Galaz Echeverría explained that telephone workers had decided to join this protest because President Vicente Fox intends to eliminate trade unions in Mexico.

Court employees strike in Peru

On September 4, employees of Peruvian courts rejected a government ultimatum to end their 52-day walkout and called for negotiations to continue. The leader of the National Federation of Court Employees, César Arteaga, indicated that the workers are determined to stay out until there is a negotiated solution to the court workers' wage demands.

Government authorities have threatened to fire any worker who does not return to work this Tuesday.

United States

Teamsters strike Las Vegas Convention Center

Workers for general contractors that provide exposition and exhibitor services at the Las Vegas Convention Center walked off the job on September 3 after talks failed to produce an agreement. Negotiators for contractors are seeking to raise the minimum number of monthly hours that workers must log before they become eligible for health benefits from 86 to 173.

Due to the intermittent nature of the convention trade, many workers are not employed full-time, and according to the Teamsters, management's proposal would make 80 percent of the union's 3,200 workers ineligible for health benefits. Teamster members have been working under a contract extension since the end of June.

Stage actors accept contract

Actors voted to accept an agreement negotiated between the leadership of Actors' Equity and the League of American Theaters and Producers that covers both Broadway and national stage productions. The union reported that of 2,421 valid ballots that were received by August 31, there were 2,332 "yes" votes and 89 "no" votes.

The old contract expired on June 27. The tentative settlement was not achieved until July 12. The major roadblock to reaching an agreement was the producers' desire to dramatically reduce the wages of union actors who are hired to appear in national tours, a demand that they have obtained in this contract. On the other hand, actors on tour will be able to earn the same as they do on Broadway, depending on how well the road show does

commercially.

Considering their difficulty in finding work, and without being presented with any other alternative, it is not surprising that so many actors voted for this settlement. It has been estimated that the percentage of union actors obtaining work on road productions has been reduced from 90 percent to 60 percent in the last 10 years.

As a result of their high unemployment, actors' health benefits have seriously suffered. With fewer Equity actors on tour, the producers have been contributing less money to the union's health insurance fund. Therefore, actors have been forced to work at least 20 weeks a year instead of the previous 10 weeks to be eligible for benefits under the union's healthcare plan. Last year, the Equity health plan actually lost \$16 million.

The producers have agreed to increase their contributions to the union's health benefits. Also, actors will receive an annual 3 percent raise over the life of the four-year contract.

Previous to this settlement, Actors' Equity reached an agreement with the Association of Non-Profit Theatre Companies that went into effect on August 2. While the new pact does increase health contributions by 35 percent over the three years of the contract, it also requires that the actors be paid at any one of six tiers depending on how well the production does at the box office.

Continental Airlines skips pension payments

Continental Airlines announced it would not make contributions to employee pension plans this year. The move takes advantage of a US law enacted in April that permits companies to defer pension payments over the next two years.

According to a July filing, Continental had planned to put \$250 million in the plans and was obligated to provide at least \$17 million. "We kind of understand the economics of the situation," said Jim Moody of the Air Line Pilots Association. The union is currently in discussions with management to scrap the defined pension plan and substitute individual retirement accounts.

The announcement was accompanied by management's decision to eliminate 425 management and clerical jobs. Continental posted a \$141 million net loss during the first half of this year as jet-fuel costs rose and competition from discount carriers prevented fare increases.

Iowa casino and race track workers strike

Workers at the Dubuque Greyhound Park and Casino went on strike September 4 after voting down management's most recent proposal. Eighteen of the complex's Pari-Mutual clerks are striking over issues

involving healthcare, holiday pay and special events. According to the International Association of Machinists, the union that represents the workers, management has access to free healthcare but will not agree to insert a healthcare package into the labor contract even if workers agree to pay for it.

Canada

Striking Labrador steelworkers reject union deal

Nine hundred fifty miners on strike in Labrador City, employed by Canada's largest iron ore producer, the Iron Ore Company of Canada, voted 53 percent against the latest contract offer that was recommended by their union, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA).

Although many of the concessions originally demanded by the employer were withdrawn, many voting against the deal were quoted as saying it did not offer enough gains in wages and pension provisions. The strike by a total of 1,400 miners started July 19 in Labrador City and includes operations in Sept-Îles, Quebec, over the issues of seniority, contracting out and wage cuts. This strike is in addition to another in nearby Wabush, Quebec, by 325 workers at Wabush mines that started July 5.

Tentative deal with Aliant

The two unions representing 4,300 striking members of the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union and the Atlantic Communications and Technical Workers Union at Aliant Inc. reached a tentative deal with the company on September 3. A ratification vote will take place on September 8. If passed, this deal would be the first since the phone companies of Atlantic Canada merged to form Aliant in 1999.

The strike began on April 23, when technical, clerical and field workers walked off the job demanding greater job security and enhanced pensions and benefits.

Parks Canada strike intensifies

Job actions that began in mid-August in national parks across Canada were stepped up September 3 when most of the 4,800 members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) involved in rotating strikes over the last three weeks walked off the job at parks in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and numerous other sites to fight for contract improvements.



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