Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 May 2005

Latin America

Argentine government workers strike

Employees of the National Institute for the Investigation and Development of Fishing (INIDEP) have been on strike for nearly a month. The workers, members of the Government Employees Association (ATE), are demanding a wage increase and that 50 temporary employees be made permanent. An assembly of workers met on May 13 and decided to continue the strike for another week because of the failure of negotiations with government fishing authorities.

The country's fishing industry depends on INIDEP reports to formulate its fishing strategy for the season. The strike prevented the completion of reports on the Whiting catch in South Atlantic waters, which would have determined how many fish could be caught this season. In addition, fishing was suspended in waters that Argentina shares with Uruguay.

ATE leaders indicated the strike would expand to include government agricultural inspectors, who have held intermittent strikes. A united struggle by both groups of workers would paralyze beef exports and the transportation of agricultural produce in addition to the fishing industry.

Bolivian teachers to strike this week

A group of marchers calling for the nationalization of natural gas will arrive in La Paz this week. The march is largely composed of members of the Bolivian Workers Federation (COB). In La Paz they will join members of the Urban Education Workers Federation (FTEU). The joint rally will mark the beginning of a national teachers strike.

FTEU leader Rene Pardo declared that this "indefinite strike combines the struggle for the recovery of Bolivia's natural resources with the campaign to achieve wage increases in line with the minimum family income set by the COB of 7,200 bolivianos and an expansion of the education budget." Pardo called a government offer of a 3 percent wage increase "laughable." The FTEU is demanding a 20 percent raise.

In a related development, rural teachers announced a 72-hour strike this week to press for a wage increase. Education Minister Celestino Choque denounced the teachers for forgetting their obligations to public school students. Choque claims the government has already addressed teachers' wage demands.

Mining struggle in Guatemala

The international human rights organization Amnesty International issued a report calling attention to the conflict in Guatemala over the exploitation of mineral resources by the Canadian firm Glamis Gold Limited. The report indicates that the conflict in the area between Glamis Gold and the inhabitants of the Department of San Marcos could result in a renewal of civil war.

One person was killed in January and several others injured in San Marcos when government troops repressed a demonstration against the company. Local officials that opposed the mine have been the object of death threats against them along with family members. Recently, San Marcos bishop Alvaro Ramazzini was denied entry into one of the mines to prevent him from investigating workers' complaints and reports of environmental damage from cyanide contamination. Glamis officials claim that they are acting safely and with the full consent of the region's inhabitants. Community leaders deny this.

Glamis has invested US$140 million to exploit mineral and gem deposits in Guatemala under a government license, mainly in areas populated by Mayan communities.

United States

Union agrees to extension of restraining order at Wabash Alloys

Attorneys representing Wabash Alloys and the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 1240 agreed to the indefinite extension of a temporary

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restraining order to limit picketing to four workers at each of the gates to the company's plant near Fort Wayne, Indiana, where workers have been locked out for two months.

One week earlier a fight erupted outside company gates between strikers and security guards from Huffmaster Inc., who were brought in by management at the beginning of the lockout. Preston Miracle, president of Local 1240, charged security guards with provoking the battle when they started hurling insults at workers and their family members.

Concessions demands by Wabash Alloys led to a breakdown in contract negotiations and a lockout on March 16. Wabash is the world's largest producer of recycled aluminum casting alloys with eight plants in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

US Airways splurges to retain management personnel

US Airways announced May 10 that it would spend as much as $55 million in the form of retention and severance packages to 1,900 of its top management and salaried personnel in an effort to keep them on board as it negotiates a merger with America West Airlines. Union workers at the bankrupt airline have given back over $2 billion in the last two years and suffered thousands of job losses.

It is estimated that a merger with America West will result in the elimination of 1,562 managerial jobs. The severance packages for 25 senior executives will cost $18 million while the remaining $32 million will be dispensed among the remaining managers.

US Airways CEO Bruce Lakefield currently brings in a salary of $425,000 a year. A clause in his contract will pay him $1.27 million, or three times his salary, in the event of a merger. The remaining top nine officers will receive double their salaries under the same conditions.

Machinists union calls Alaska Airlines layoffs an illegal lockout

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) called Alaska Airlines' May 13 decision to replace its 472 baggage handlers at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport with a new workforce supplied by Menzies Aviation an illegal lockout under the Railway Labor Act. Airline management says the move will save the company $13 million a year.

The decision came after the Seattle group of union baggage handlers voted by an 87 percent margin to reject a company proposal to farm out jobs and increase workers' portion of health care costs. The rejection was then backed up by an 85 percent vote to strike Alaska Airlines.

Menzies Aviation provides ground services for some 500 airline customers around the world, including Alaska Airlines operations at West Coast locations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose and Portland.

Canada

Interior truckers strike in British Columbia

About 50 truck drivers went on strike in British Columbia, shutting down 15 construction sites in the Okanagan and Kootenays areas of the province. The truckers, represented by the Teamsters union, are demanding a raise to cover higher costs for fuel. They are asking the construction contractors for an extra $10 an hour, bringing the rate for a tandem trailer to $75 an hour, while the contractors are offering $72 an hour.

The strike follows a pair of one-day strikes by about 500 Lower Mainland truckers on April 29 and May 6, who were demanding a tax break to offset higher fuel prices.

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