

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 May 2005

Latin America

Zinc miners strike in Peru

Employees of the Volcan Mining Company walked off their jobs on May 26 to demand profit sharing payments owed to them by the company. Volcan management denies owing the workers the money and insists that the strike is illegal. So far, the walkout has affected two out of Volcan's three mines, Cerro de Pasco and Yauli. As of May 29, operations were continuing at a third mine, Chungar.

Peru is the third largest producer of zinc in the world.

Bank employees strike in Argentina

Fifty thousand employees of government banks carried out a two-day strike on May 26 and 27 in Argentina to press for higher wages. A spokesperson for the Banking Association (the union that represents the employees) had declared in advance that employees would provide services only for retired workers cashing their checks.

This strike follows up a 24-hour walkout the week before. It was most effective in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Santa Cruz and Tucuman. The workers are demanding a 30 percent wage increase, protection of their seven-and-a-half-hour day and a new contract.

Fish packers strike in southern Argentina

Cannery workers at the southern town of Puerto Madryn have been on strike for over a month. They are demanding a 100 percent wage increase. Picket lines have effectively shut down fish packing plants and an industrial park located on the docks. Puerto Madryn is located in northern Chubut Province in Argentina's Patagonia region.

Last week management offered the strikers 6.50 pesos an hour (about \$US2.20), an 80 percent raise—the same wage granted to workers at another port, Comodoro Rivadavia, also in Chubut, with the provision that the packers accept a 3-year wage freeze going forward and a guarantee of social peace. The Puerto Madryn strikers, who insist on 7.80 pesos with no restrictions, have rejected the offer.

At the nearby Port of Rawson, south of Puerto Madryn, workers occupying a cannery protested by giving away fish at hospitals and schools. They demanded that Governor Das Neves intervene on their behalf. Instead, provincial authorities have announced that they intend to have the police evict the workers.

About 70 percent of workers in the Chubut fish canneries are female. A striker said that the monthly pay at fish canneries in Spain is 1,100 euros (4,000 pesos), while in Argentina it is 500 pesos, which is not enough even for a family with two incomes. The monthly family minimum is estimated at 1,800 pesos.

Panamanian national strike to defend Social Security

In response to last week's police repression of protests against the dismantling of the country's social security system, Panamanian unions organized a general strike of indefinite duration beginning May 26.

Throughout the week, police used tear gas to attack thousands of demonstrators in Panama City, Colon and other cities. Sixteen demonstrators were injured and 336 were arrested. The demonstrations had been organized by the National Front in Defense of Social Security to oppose the reforms to the system proposed by President Martin Torrijos. Among the protesters were many workers and teachers.

Despite the protests, the Panamanian legislature approved draft reforms that raise the age of retirement for women to 62 from 57 and for men to 65 from 62, and increase workers' contributions to the social security fund from 7.5 percent of wages to 10.75 percent, while increasing the employers' contribution from 10.75 to 13.25 percent. The Social Security pension fund has a deficit of \$4,000 million and risks insolvency by 2012.

On Friday, over 60,000 workers and students rallied in Panama City to protest the new law. Groups of protesters battled the police, who responded with volleys of tear gas. Over 200 were arrested.

United States

University of California technical workers call one-day strike

Some 3,000 technical workers at the University of California walked out on a one-day strike May 26 after long drawn-out contract talks produced a mere 1.5 percent wage offer—a proposal that the University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTe) union called “insulting”.

The UPTe is asking for a pay system based on seniority that would provide for annual hikes of 1-2 percent above the cost of living increases proposed by the university.

UPTe represents some 10,000 lab assistants, computer

technicians and researchers across the university system. Workers are paid approximately \$30,000 to \$40,000 annually.

The UPTE has cited a 33 percent turnover rate among technical workers employed on a variety of critical research projects. “We’re out here to send a public message that staff turnover is unacceptable. We can’t find a cure for cancer if one-third of the people are leaving every year for the private sector,” said union director Dominic Chan.

Coca-Cola workers strike in California and Connecticut

About 1,700 workers in Los Angeles and another 400 in East Hartford, Connecticut went on strike last week against Coca-Cola enterprises over a company proposal to force workers to shoulder a greater share of health care costs. According to the Teamsters union, some of the bitterness among workers stems from the company’s lavish health care plans handed out to departing executives.

Coca-Cola Enterprises, a separate entity from Coca-Cola Company, is the world’s largest beverage bottler. The two strikes are regional disputes involving production workers and drivers and represent only a small portion of Coca-Cola Enterprises’ 74,000 workers in 46 states.

Ohio county workers strike against paid benefit takeaway

Some 500 workers at Franklin County Children Services in Columbus, Ohio went on strike May 18 in opposition to the county agency’s demand that union members begin paying a portion of health insurance premiums. Workers are opposing the new demand on the basis that they have swapped wage increases in the past to maintain benefits. It is believed that the county will broaden the attack on full-paid benefits to another 5,300 county workers.

New York Racing Association clerks fired for sick-out

The New York Racing Association (NYRA) announced the firing May 24 of 59 clerks and the suspension of another 30 after an alleged sick-out. The action by the 89 clerks took place May 21 during a live racing program at Belmont Park in New York and stems from the failure of the Division of Mutual Employees union and the NYRA to reach an agreement since the old contract expired in 2003.

When the sick-out became apparent on the day of the action, the union made phone calls to all clerks. Those who answered and came in to work were issued suspensions without pay. Union chairman Sal Zammitto told the *New York Post* the union “did not sanction any type of walkout or strike.”

New York nursing home workers protest

Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) picketed 44 upstate New York nursing homes May 28 to win support for increased wages and benefits in the

current contract negotiations. The SEIU is asking the state legislature to appropriate \$80 million in the 2005-2006 budget to assist nursing homes.

In some instances, management of the nursing homes back the legislative measure as the only way to retain staff and reduce the turnover rate.

Canada

Ottawa taxi drivers’ strike ends

About nine hundred drivers with Ottawa’s Blue Line Taxi service have ended their strike with a ratification vote on May 22. Some 88 percent voted in favor of a new three-year contract with the taxi line’s owner, Coventry Connections.

The drivers, members of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 1688, went on strike at the beginning of May against the company’s demand for a 32 per cent increase in fees. The ratified contract includes a lower increase and insures that the employer cannot introduce major technological changes, such as GPS for tracking vehicles, without driver approval.

Ontario power utility employees stage one-day strike

On May 25 more than 1,000 professional employees at Hydro One, the Ontario government-owned power distribution company, held a one-day strike across the province in a new attempt to pressure the company to agree to a fair contract. The workers, represented by the Society of Energy Professionals, have rejected the employer’s previous offers twice, both times with an overwhelming margin of over 95 per cent. The offers contained demands for a 10 per cent cut in wages and lower benefits for all new-hires, as well as an additional four hours of work per week without compensation. The one-day strike was called by the union only after an unsuccessful two-week work-to-rule campaign.



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