

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 August 2005

## Latin America

### Hundreds protest Oaxaca repression

On July 21 hundreds of workers marched through Oaxaca, a city in southwest Mexico, in solidarity with employees of the *Noticias Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca* newspaper who had been brutally assaulted July 18 by an armed goon squad. Thirty-one press workers were conducting a sit-in to defend the offices of *Noticias*, an opposition newspaper, and were violently expelled by the masked men, who were armed with baseball bats and metal rods. After expelling the reporters, the goons vandalized the newspaper's equipment.

Several columns of protesters marched across the city with signs that blamed the assault on state authorities and called for an end to the repression of workers.

The reporters had refused to leave the *Noticias* offices on June 17, charging that a so-called strike, called by the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Farmers (CROC), was nothing of the sort. The CROC is affiliated with the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI.) *Noticias* workers indicated that the strike was called behind the workers' backs and used as a pretext for shutting down the paper for its opposition to Oaxaca Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, also a member of the PRI. Workers in the area reported that a police patrol, present during the attack, refused to intervene.

*Noticias* uncovered corruption during the administration of the former governor of Oaxaca, Jose Murat.

### Mass demonstration in Guatemala against CAFTA

On July 29, a demonstration in Guatemala City of thousands of workers protested the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) between Central America and the United States. The protest also targeted the economic policies of the administration of President Oscar Berger and the high cost of living, demanding a higher minimum wage for all workers. Despite an increasing cost of living, the government has refused to raise the minimum wage for two years in a row, insisting that wages be raised at employers' discretion, based on workers' productivity.

Leading the march were members of the teachers'

union.

### Argentine workers demand higher wages

On July 29, Argentine Airlines maintenance workers and pilots shut access to Buenos Aires Aeroparque Airport, protesting 30 months of stalled negotiations and demanding higher wages and the reinstatement of laid-off workers. Last Tuesday's job actions at both of this city's main airports, Aeroparque and Ezeiza, resulted in the cancellation of flights affecting 2,000 passengers.

Also on July 29, a massive demonstration by municipal employees blocked the Pueyrredon Bridge that connects this sprawling metropolis to the south with the working class city of Avellaneda. The protest lasted until 5 p.m. At issue are workers' demands for higher wages.

On July 28, 200 acetate workers at Acetatos Argentinos demonstrated over wages and working conditions; the workers are demanding an investigation of chemical agents used in the plant. They also demanded that employees at a subcontracting firm be recognized as members of the textile workers union and for permanent jobs for temporary workers. The workers rallied at 2 p.m. in front of the company's plant in Buenos Aires. They announced that the protest will continue indefinitely until the company's managers address their demands.

Acetate workers have conducted weekly Thursday rallies for several weeks with no results, so far.

## United States

### Carlisle CEO won't settle Teamsters strike

Richmond McKinnish, CEO of the Carlisle Companies, said, "We're not in a hurry to settle" the nearly four-month strike by 270 Teamsters at the company's subsidiary Johnson Truck Bodies in Rice Lake, Wisconsin. "Too many companies settle labor disputes focusing on short-term results. We're not going to do that and are remaining determined to fix this cost problem for the long term," McKinnish stated during a second-quarter conference call last week.

The Teamsters struck Johnson Truck after the company insisted on an open shop and an end to deducting union dues from workers' paychecks. Negotiations were

previously floundering over the company's demand for deep cuts in health insurance benefits and no wage increases during the first year of a three-year contract followed by 10 cent increases in years two and three.

Last week, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rejected four appeals by the Teamsters for unfair labor practices while finding merit for two minor filings. Johnson Truck plant manager Ron Ricci brushed aside the importance of the NLRB findings: "The union is running around telling its members that the strike is going to be over and that they are going back to work in two weeks and that the new hires and crossovers are going to lose their jobs, and that is simply not true."

### **Texas industrial strike concludes first week**

Striking workers ended their first week on strike at Vesuvius USA's Tyler, Texas, plant. Members of the Glass, Molders, Potters, Plastics & Allied Workers Local 58 voted to strike after the company refused to move on its demands for increased pensions, matching 401(k) plan and a 60 cent raise in the contract's first year.

Workers from other area plants along with Teamsters truck drivers have joined strikers on the picket line. One supporter, Carlotta Butler, told the *Tyler Morning Telegraph*, "We work all those years and we deserve retirement. We deserve to take care of our families...it's for the future. We can't afford to send our children to college to be able to give them a better future than us, so they don't have to do this."

Vesuvius manufactures high-performance specialty ceramics, refractory products and control systems for industrial applications. It has operations worldwide.

### **Copper company issues letter to striking Arizona miners to return to work**

Management for Asarco Corp. issued a letter to 1,500 striking miners at copper mines above Tucson, Arizona, warning them of the company's dire financial position should workers remain out on strike.

"We ask that each of you consider what is best for the preservation of your job. Coming back to work while we continue negotiating towards an agreement on the labor contract is in the best interest of all parties involved." Asarco CEO Daniel Tellechea and seven other company officials signed the letter.

Asarco, which is owned by Grupo Mexico, is demanding a three-year wage freeze and cuts in medical and pension benefits at a time when the price of copper is at record heights, closing at \$1.69 a pound last week. The letter made reference to a recent Standard & Poor's downgrade of the mining company's credit rating, citing

high exposure to environmental and asbestos liabilities, high production costs, and the recent strike.

### **Northwest Airlines hires new security for surveillance of mechanics**

Northwest Airlines added new security guards to step up surveillance of mechanics as the fourth largest airline heads towards an August 20 strike deadline with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA).

At the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, the new security guards showed up to film flight attendants and mechanics picketing a building last week. According to Bob Rose, AMFA Local 5 president, Northwest used security guards during the 1990s to provoke mechanics by following workers to the restroom and around their worksite.

Northwest is pressing to get \$1.1 billion in wage concessions. The pilots' union and salaried employees already have given back \$300 million, but a deal has not been reached with flight attendants and mechanics.

On July 29, the flight attendants' union appeared in court to pursue a suit against Northwest over the airline's policy of forcing union attendants to train replacement workers should the attendants go on strike along with the mechanics union.

### **Canada**

### **British Columbia sawmill workers stage wildcat strike**

Night shift workers at Prince George sawmill in Fort St. John in the northeastern part of British Columbia walked off the job just before the end of their shift on the morning of July 25. The day shift workers refused to cross the picket line, so the mill was shut down until the strikers agreed to return to work the next day.

The workers' main grievances centered on how job postings are filled as well as issues around training, safety, and contracting out. They also protested a move by the company to have logs already cut to length at the point of harvest, which will eliminate 10 jobs and violate the existing contract. Workers are members of Steelworkers local 1-424. The union has made no comment on their action.

The Prince George mill is operated by Vancouver-based Canfor.



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