

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 August 2005

Mexican steelworkers picket labor ministry, block roads

Two hundred striking steelworkers and miners picketed the offices of the Mexican labor ministry on August 12 to demand the ministry recognize a strike begun by miners on August 1. On August 13, the strikers continued their protest by blocking access roads into Mexico City.

On August 10, the Labor Ministry declared the strike by 2,400 workers at several steel processing facilities in Mexico “inexistent”—a ruling that would allow the company to begin dismissing employees. The strike has shut down several sites operated by the Sicartsa company, including an iron ore mine and the sprawling mill in the city of Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan state.

The unions declared that they would appeal the ruling, pointing out that the Labor Ministry based its determination on a legal technicality—the workers began walking out 10 minutes before they were supposed to, at midnight on August 1.

The Sicartsa strikers ignored the Labor Ministry ruling, launching an appeal to Mexico’s 250,000 steelworkers for solidarity by striking for an hour on August 15. The metal workers’ union called on executives of the Villacero Group to negotiate with them. The union threatened to begin strikes at other steel plants across Mexico this week. The Villacero Group controls a substantial portion of Mexico’s steel industry, including Sicartsa, the country’s fourth-largest steel company.

Mexican copper workers postpone solidarity strike

The union that represents copper workers in northern Mexico postponed a 24-hour strike in solidarity with Arizona miners. The strike, which was set for August 12, was rescheduled for August 15. The Grupo Mexico holding company owns the mines on both sides of the border. According to a leader of the copper miners’ union, the reason for the postponement is to make the walkout coincide with a series of national protests.

In the US, miners at mines operated by a company known as Asarco, and also owned by Grupo Mexico, went on strike in July at plants in Arizona and Texas. Last week Asarco declared bankruptcy.

Guatemalan teachers and students protest violence

On August 12, 300 Guatemalan teachers and students marched in Guatemala City to protest attacks on teachers by youth gangs. Their march ended at the Education Ministry, where they petitioned the government for greater protection.

The latest incident took place last week when Zulema Castañeda, a biology teacher, was shot and killed by a 15-year-old outside the high school where she taught.

Nicaraguan banana workers protest pesticide

Thirteen Nicaraguan banana workers participated in a four-day hunger strike last week in Managua at the Red Cross blood bank. The protesters demanded that the country’s Congress reaffirm legislation that allows workers to sue producers of a pesticide—Nemagon—that was used for years in the country’s banana fields.

The law will be abrogated under the terms of the Central American Free Trade Association (CAFTA) treaty that was recently approved by the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and the United States. Nicaragua and Costa Rica have yet to vote on it. If enacted, the treaty would bar Nicaraguan workers from suing over the use of the pesticide.

Nemagon was used in northeastern Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s despite abundant evidence that it was hazardous to human health. Twenty-six thousand workers were affected, 17,000 of whom participate in an organization fighting for compensation. Among the ailments attributed to the pesticide are skin cancer, growth deficiencies, sterility and blindness. Some 938 deaths have been blamed on Nemagon.

The banana workers are demanding that the legislature reject that aspect of CAFTA and reaffirm the rights of Nemagon victims. In 2001, Nicaragua’s National Assembly approved law 364, which allows banana workers to sue the manufacturers and users of the pesticide—Dole Fruit Co., Shell Chemical, Chiquita Brands, International Brands, Standard Fruit Co. and Del Monte—in Nicaraguan and US courts.

Recently, a Nicaraguan court ruled in favor of 150 victims of Nemagon who had sued Standard Fruit Co., Dole Food Co., Occidental Chemical Corp. and Shell Oil Co. Evidence in the suit revealed correspondence that confirms that these firms were well aware of the product’s health effects on banana plantation workers.

Protest continues in Puerto Rico

On August 12, thousands of public employees and their supporters marched on the Santa Catalina Palace, Puerto Rico's government house, protesting plans to impose on their backs the cost of the island's current economic collapse. The Puerto Rican government plans to impose wage cuts and a shorter workweek on state employees. Workers carried signs demanding that the rich pay for the country's crisis. While workers marched and chanted against this outrage, AFL-CIO leader Jose Rodriguez Baez denounced the attacks on workers' living standards. Initially, Puerto Rico's AFL-CIO had accepted the proposed cuts.

Participating in the mass demonstration were representatives of the US trade union bureaucracy, including leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), including SEIU leader Dennis Rivera, who flew in from New York City. The latter is a seasoned bureaucrat who has been involved in many betrayals of New York City's workers. The presence of these men is a sure sign that the struggle of the Puerto Rican workers is in danger of being sold out.

As the march was getting underway, news came out that Rivera and Governor Acevedo Vilá had carried out private negotiations on the proposed cuts.

Strike-bound mining corporation files bankruptcy

Mexican-owned copper miner Asarco Corp. filed for bankruptcy last week. The move came five weeks into a strike by 1,500 members of United Steelworkers at Asarco operations near Tucson, Arizona, and Amarillo, Texas.

The steelworkers' union charged the move was aimed at avoiding \$1 billion from an environmental cleanup suit and \$900 million owed on 95,000 asbestos-related injury claims. The bankruptcy move came as thousands of Mexican copper miners who work for Asarco's parent, Grupo Mexico, were planning a one-day strike to support the striking US copper miners. Asarco had been demanding a freeze on wages and pensions along with shifting increased costs for health care onto the backs of workers.

Pittsburgh Ballet threatens to replace orchestra with canned music

The union representing musicians for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre (PBT) will file a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board over ballet management's decision to replace live musicians with recorded music for the entire 2005-2006 season. PBT officials claim the move will save the struggling ballet \$551,000.

During negotiations for a new contract, the PBT initially demanded musicians' pay be cut from the \$120 per performance to a mere \$70. Before the contract for Musicians Union Local 60-471 expired on June 30, the PBT

changed its demand to \$115 per performance and asked for a \$5 cut in rehearsal pay from \$95 to \$90. But union negotiator Nathan Kahn told the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* the new offer contained language that "would have allowed them to do anything they wanted. All tenure for the musicians would have been eroded. They could hire anybody they want. They could hire nonunion. They could hire students."

Workers stage one-day strike at Washington State caregiver

One hundred workers for Providence SoundHomeCare and Hospice branches in three counties near Olympia, Washington staged a one-day strike August 10 to demand better wages and increased staffing levels. The contract covering nurses, social workers and hospice workers represented by the Service Employees International Union expired one day earlier. Providence used non-contract employees to fill in during the strike.

Nurses point to a large turnover rate during the past year that has put heavy pressure on the current staff. Currently, no talks are scheduled between management and the union.

Regina civic workers ready to strike

Civic workers in the Saskatchewan capital of Regina are in a legal position to strike, and their unions have announced that the workers will walk out on August 22, after the Canada Summer Games, if negotiations, which have been going on for 18 months, fail to bring an agreement. The 1,700 workers include three groups—outside workers, inside workers and Regina Transit workers. Outside workers are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 21, inside workers by CUPE Local 7, and Regina Transit workers by the Amalgamated Transit Union.

The main issue in the dispute is wages; the city has offered a pay increase of only 4 percent over three years. A CUPE Local 7 representative is quoted as saying, "It's hard to believe the employer expects us to accept 4 percent over three years, when city councilors accepted pay increases of 5.1 percent over two years."



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