

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 August 2005

No agreement yet in Mexican steel strike

The Mexican Miners and Metalworkers Union (SNTMMRM) announced on August 19 that negotiations have yielded no agreement in the strike by 2,800 workers against the Sicartsa steel mill in Michoacan state and the Atibsa engineering firm. While Mexican labor courts declared the strike illegal on August 10, union officials indicated that for the time being the workers and miners would stay out. The walkout began August 1.

Union leaders also denounced the Villacero Group, the holding company that controls Sicartsa and Atibsa, for its “lockout” stance, indicating that management appeared to be in no hurry to settle the strike. Villacero officials have signaled that a possible reorganization of the steel mill is being considered, possibly involving the closing of the mill itself.

The Villacero Group acquired the Lazaro Cardenas mill as part of a wave of privatizations in 1989, for what many considered a fraction of its true value. Part of the deal involved wage concessions and the sacking of hundreds of workers who, to this day, have not been properly compensated. The privatization took place under the government of President Raul Salinas with the full complicity of the union bureaucracy, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and Mexico’s ruling elite.

On Saturday, more than 2,000 workers marched through Lazaro Cardenas in support of the strike, demanding that management agree to the workers’ demands. The stumbling block in the negotiations appears to be the union’s demand that nonunion workers employed both by Grupo Villacero and by private contractors be included in the union’s contract. From the standpoint of GV’s management, this is nonnegotiable demand.

In a gesture of solidarity with the Sicartsa strikers, on August 15, 250,000 metal workers and miners walked out for an hour in steel plants across Mexico.

SNTMMRM President Napoleon Gomez Urrutia declared that the national strikes would continue unless the strikers’ demands are addressed. He gave no indication on when the next job action would take place.

Ecuador’s military represses anti-oil company protests

The Ecuadorian military assaulted protesters and placed the provinces of Orellana and Sucumbios under a state of emergency. The demonstrations took place in the Lago Agrio region in northeastern Ecuador, where the country’s oil production is concentrated. Workers of both provinces have declared themselves on strike against the activities of two transnational oil companies that exploit the oil, Occidental and EnCara, based in the United States and Canada, respectively. They have demanded the cancellation of contracts with those two companies and the renegotiation of oil contracts so that the state retains 50 percent of profits; oil revenue would be used to provide roads and social services. In addition, the strikers are demanding that the oil companies provide jobs to the inhabitants of the area.

As part of the protest, the demonstrators disrupted oil transportation, blocking oil deliveries. The strikers occupied dozens of oil wells.

The military forces that entered the area to break up the barricades used tear gas and rubber bullets. Thousands of people poured onto the streets in opposition to the military attack and in support of the civic strikes. So far, 60 have been injured and hundreds have been jailed.

Massive march of unemployed workers in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Capping four days of street demonstrations, thousands of unemployed and underemployed workers marched into downtown Buenos Aires and rallied in Plaza de Mayo square, across from the Government House, to demand greater government assistance.

Starting August 16, hundreds of unemployed workers occupied the historic square as part of four days of protest that also included marches and rallies in the city’s neighborhoods and sit-ins to block major intersections.

The demonstrators demanded that the monthly government subsidy to every unemployed family be raised from 150 pesos (about US\$52) to 350 pesos. Leaders of the unemployed also point out that many

families are still not covered by the government subsidies, despite a gradual decrease in unemployment

Officials of the government of Nestor Kirchner denounced the demonstrators for links to left-wing parties and declared that the government would not be pressured to act on the marchers' demands.

Brazilian public health workers end 72-day strike

The strike by employees of the Social Security Institute accepted a government offer last week for a 7 percent wage increase, well short of their original demand of 18 percent. The strike lasted 72 days. Retirees will receive a 5 percent increase in their pensions.

Court employees on strike in Bolivia

Five thousand court workers went on strike August 15. The 72-hour strike was over wages and job security and came in the wake of a 48-hour strike one week earlier. The strike was brought on by government reforms that, beginning this September, will force employees to compete for their jobs and take a wage cut.

Unfair Labor Practices strike at Indiana metal processor

About 115 members of the Operating Engineers Local 150 struck the Levy Company last week in Burns Harbor, Indiana, over unfair labor practices. Workers authorized a strike back in May and contract talks broke off in June.

The union has leveled 15 separate charges against Levy, a contractor at Mittal Steel USA, which performs slag processing and metal reclamation. Among the charges are intimidating and threatening workers engaged in lawful activity, creating an impression of unlawful surveillance and refusal to hire union members for job openings.

Local 150 represents 3,500 workers in Northwestern Indiana and represents workers at other locations such as Levy Indiana Slab Co. and Edward C. Levy Co. While hinting at work actions at these plants, the union has yet to make any moves in that direction.

Teamsters strike New Jersey bottler

Workers narrowly defeated a four-year contract August 14 and walked out on strike at the Beverage Distribution Center in Pennsauken, New Jersey. The company, which bottles Pepsi, Tropicana and Canada Dry products, offered members of Teamsters Local 830 modest raises but demanded increased contributions to health insurance.

Truck drivers and vending crews, who reached earlier separate agreements, have been crossing picket lines to deliver bottled products. No new talks had been scheduled.

Lockout at manufacturing plant in central New York State

Interface Solutions, in Volney, New York, locked out 109 members of UNITE HERE Local 701T and brought in replacement workers last week after the two sides were unable to come to an agreement. One month ago, workers voted down the company's last offer that called for a 20 percent pay cut, the freezing of pensions and the elimination of retiree medical insurance.

The union charges that Interface has brought in a high-paid lawyer and has showed little interest in reaching a settlement. Interface Solutions, with headquarters in Pennsylvania, has plants in Beaver Falls and Hoosick. The company manufactures gaskets and backing for vinyl flooring.

CBC employees locked out

On August 15 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), a crown (government-owned) company, locked out about 5,500 of its employees, members of the Canadian Media Guild (CMG). The main issues in the 15-month-long contract negotiations, which had broken off the previous evening, are CBC's demand for greater flexibility to hire contract and part-time workers as well as wages. The CMG, which represents locked-out journalists and technicians, has argued that this puts the job security of full-time staff in danger.

During the lockout, management has been using news reports from its British counterpart, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), to fill in for CBC journalists, prompting a number of BBC workers and journalists to refuse to provide assistance and material to the CBC. In addition, some of the CBC management have shown their support for picketing staff who have been locked out in the dispute. There have been no negotiations since the lockout began, and no talks are currently scheduled.



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