Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 October 2005

Latin America

Volkswagen workers strike in Brazil

On October 7, a strike by 18,000 assembly line workers at the three Volkswagen plants in Brazil entered its second week. The main issues are wages and profit sharing. The autoworkers union has demanded a 5,500 reales profit-sharing bonus (approximately US$2,250).

Management had initially offered a bonus of 4,200 reales. This week it upped its offer to 5,000 reales. Strikers rejected the second offer October 6. Union officials accused VW of manipulating numbers and indicated that the company is demanding, in return for the profit sharing, a production quota of 212,000 autos for 2005, which is unattainable.

The walkout began September 30 at VW's biggest plant at Sao Bernardo. The following Monday and Tuesday workers at the Sao Carlos and Taubate plants joined them. All three plants are in Sao Paulo state and normally produce 10,000 cars and 6,000 motors a week.

Last year Volkswagen cut its global investment plans in the face of accelerating price competition worldwide and a sluggish market in Germany.

Slowdown threat by Sao Paulo subway workers

Train operators at the Sao Paulo Metro will assemble October 10 to vote on a slowdown. A majority vote in favor would initiate the job action on October 11. The train operators will operate trains at restricted speeds between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. The purpose of the job action is to protest management's attempts to lengthen the workday from 36 to 40 hours per week. This policy would result in a reduction in the workforce.

National bank strike in Brazil

Bank employees in 20 Brazilian states walked out October 6 on a strike of indefinite duration. The next day the strikers were joined by bank employees in Brasilia and Santa Catarina. The strike was called by the National Bank Employees Federation (CNB) to protest wage proposals by the National Banking Federation (FENEBRAN), an employer group.

Workers are also on strike in Acre, Alagoas, Amapá, Bahia, Ceará, Espírito Santo, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Pará, Paraíba, Paraná, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Sul, Rio Grande do Norte, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Sergipe states. Bank employees in the states of Goias, Amazonas and Tocantins also joined the strike, though they are not affiliated to the CNB. In all, 400,000 workers are involved in the action. There is a substantial gap between the workers' demand of an 11.77 percent wage increase and the 4 percent offered by FENEBRAN.

CNB is also demanding that banks provide job security to their employees, 14 paychecks a year and cost-of-living adjustments whenever inflation exceeds 3 percent.

United States

NLRB complaint against Arizona copper company

Region 28 staff of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) filed a complaint against Asarco LLC charging the Arizona copper mining company with illegally intimidating its workers. The United Steelworkers, which represents 1,500 copper miners in their third month on strike, filed charges alleging that the company spied on and withheld vacation pay from workers as a way of forcing a strike.

Gordon Jorgensen, an assistant NLRB regional director, told the *Arizona Republic*, "We found the violations were serious enough to have provoked the strike." Should an NLRB judge uphold the findings, Asarco would be required to rehire at the conclusion of the strike any worker who had been replaced, or put them on a list to be hired as openings occur.

Asarco, which filed for bankruptcy on September 10, originally called for the slashing of benefits and a wage freeze. Now the company is willing to extend the old agreement for one year. The Steelworkers union is

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pressing the company to wave its right under Chapter 11 to cancel labor agreements. It also wants the company to require any potential buyer to recognize the union.

Six injured in Texas plant explosion

Six workers were injured October 6 at a Port Comfort, Texas plastics plant when an explosion lifted a large column of black smoke above the facility. Formosa Plastics Corporation, located on the Texas coast, manufactures PVC pipe along with vinyl floor and wall coverings that use several types of flammable material in their fabrication.

Authorities shut down all roads in the vicinity and warned residents to turn off air conditioners and remain inside. Among the injured, 30-year-old Roger Green had burns on 36 percent of his body. Around 1,100 people work at the Texas plant. The privately-held New Jersey company also has operations in Delaware City, Delaware; Illiopolis, Illinois; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Strike ends at Indiana scrap metal plant

Members of Teamsters Local 142 voted by a 4-1 margin to end a three-week strike October 2 at the PSC Metals plant in Burns Harbor, Indiana. Workers initially struck over wage and pension issues. According to the Teamsters, PSC Metals paid substantially lower wages than other scrap metal processors in the area.

Both the Teamsters and the company declined to reveal the contents of the new three-year agreement.

Canada

BC steelworkers ratify contract

About 1,200 workers at Teck Cominco's smelter in Trail, British Columbia ratified a new three-year contract on October 7, ending the strike that began July 19. The contract includes a wage increase of 10 percent, a 12 percent pension improvement, improved benefits and a lump-sum $3,500 cash payment. Wages and pensions were the key issues in the strike. The workers are represented by United Steelworkers.

Kidd Creek Metallurgical Division workers walk out

Six hundred fifty workers at Metallurgical Division in Kidd Creek near Timmins, Ontario went on strike October 2 after negotiations broke off between the employer and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union. The two sides were unable to reach an agreement on wages and benefits. The employer's last offer included wage increases of 2, 1 and 1 percent in the next three years and a signing bonus of $1,000. The previous contract had expired two days before. The last strike at the Metallurgical Division was in 1999 and lasted three weeks.

The Kidd Creek facility produces copper and zinc and is owned by Falconbridge Ltd., the world's third-largest nickel and zinc producer.

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