

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 December 2005

Latin America

Metal workers on strike in Peru

One hundred and twenty employees of the Minsur smelting company in Peru announced on December 2 that they would strike the plant December 5. The workers are demanding improvements in their wages and working conditions. Minsur is the third largest tin mining and smelting company in the world and the only one in Peru. Its smelting subsidiary, Funsur, located 300 kilometers from Lima, expects to produce 42,000 tons of high quality tin this year.

A spokesperson from the metal workers union said that Funsur management is refusing to negotiate with its workers. The strikers are demanding an increase of US\$1.50 in their daily wages. Management offered one Peruvian sol, US\$0.29. Currently Funsur employees earn about US\$470 soles per month.

Nicaraguan health strike escalates

Last week a strike by doctors and paramedics escalated in Nicaragua. The striking health workers suspended non-emergency services within areas of public hospitals that are contracted out to the Social Security Administration and that are reserved for paying patients.

The Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD) that represents the strikers is demanding a US\$23 million increase in the health budget for 2006, including a 70 percent raise for doctors and paramedics, up from the US\$10 million approved last week by the legislature. The government insists that such an increase would violate an austerity agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The strike is in its third week.

Labor Minister Virgilion Gurdian has given the strikers one week to return to work, otherwise he has threaten to declare the strike illegal.

FETSALUD leaders are scheduled to meet this Wednesday to decide whether or not to end the strike.

Bolivian miners protest startup of silver mine

A protest by hundreds of Bolivian miners on November 29 blocked the construction of a gigantic zinc and silver mine in Southeast Bolivia. The San Cristobal Mine is scheduled to begin operations in 2007. The mine is owned by US-based Apex Silver Mines. Once on-line it will be one of the largest open-pit mines in the world.

The miners have charged the mine management of practicing discriminatory hiring policies that favor Peruvian and Chilean miners over Bolivians. Bolivian law stipulates that up to 15

percent of the mine's employees can be foreigners. The miners charge that in this case the mine managers have exceeded that limit and are demanding that government officials help resolve the dispute.

Metalworkers strike in Brazil

Members of the Metal Industries Union of Espirito Santo (SINDIMETAL) are on strike against Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, Companhia Siderúrgica de Tubarão, Belgo Mineira and Civit, four metal processing companies in the state of Espirito Santo. The workers are demanding a wage increase of 10 percent.

On December 2, several hundred strikers rallied across from the Labor Ministry in the city of Vitoria to protest a judicial decision that severely limits picketing at the factory gates. The union is also being forced to provide a crew of workers to keep a level of activity at the plants. The measures prevent workers both from interfering with strikebreaking activity by the management and force them to scab on their own strike.

A union spokesperson declared that the strike would last until a settlement is reached with the companies. SINDIMETAL Secretary General Roberto Pereira de Souza indicated that output per worker this year is 2.3 percent greater than what it was last year at this time, but that workers are not being compensated for the extra productivity.

United States

EPA failed to warn workers of toxic exposure

The Environmental Protection Agency failed to warn workers at a Cintas Corporation industrial laundry in Traverse City, Michigan that they were exposed to levels of PCE (perchloroethylene) as high as 9,000 parts per billion by volume (ppbv). EPA studies show that exposure to PCE at rates higher than 2,400 ppbv increase cancer risk by one person per one hundred.

In 1992, the EPA declared the former superfund site owned by Grand Traverse Overall Supply Company safe for humans. In 1996 PCE was discovered on the site. However, another eight years went by before the EPA took any action. In March 2005, the EPA finished its tests and declared air at the facility, now owned by Cintas, not "acute" but withheld data for several months pending a final report.

Newly obtained EPA documents show the federal agency communicated to Cintas that it would be "sensitive" about releasing data concerning PCE on the grounds that it might be used by the union UNITE to aid its organizing drive at Cintas.

Strike at Kentucky non-profit for the blind

Some 100 members of Teamsters Local 89 struck the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky on November 30. Workers cited salaries, health care premiums and vacation as the main reasons for the work stoppage.

American Printing House is seeking to implement a contract that would immediately raise premiums for families from \$235 a month to \$272 a month. According to the union, rates could go as high as \$471 a month under the new proposal. Workers, who currently average about \$11 an hour, would receive annual hourly wage increases of 60 cents, 35 cents and 25 cents an hour. The company also wants to force workers to take a week of vacation during the annual plant shutdown. Previously workers were only required to surrender two days of vacation for this purpose.

Teamsters represent binders, proofreaders, shipping clerks, custodial and maintenance workers at the facility who produce educational materials for the visually impaired. No new talks have been scheduled.

Pennsylvania county workers end strike

Workers in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania voted to accept a five-year agreement, bringing their six-week strike to an end. The contract provides for a 17 percent wage increase but also imposes a portion of health care costs for the first time to any of the county's workers.

As opposed to paying a percentage of health care premiums, which workers cannot control, the agreement calls for workers to pay 1 percent of their salary in the first year, 1.5 percent in 2007 and 2 percent in 2008. The county claims it will save 10 percent on the cost of health care through the mechanism. County Commissioner Tom Ceraso told the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, "If we can try to achieve similar things with the rest of the unions, it would be really significant." Another 2,000 county workers do not pay toward health care costs.

Many of the workers who struck the county work with abused and neglected children and have annual starting salaries of \$29,000. Clerical workers make between \$20,000 and \$24,000 yearly.

Illinois school teachers strike

About 800 teachers in Decatur, Illinois walked out on strike November 30 when the Decatur Education Association rejected a one-year agreement offered by the school district. Teachers have indicated that they want better pay and work schedules.

The district and union have been negotiating since July 11. The old contract expired August 17 and teachers voted to strike November 16 unless an acceptable agreement was reached.

New York University threatens striking graduate student-workers

New York University has told the 1,000 graduate student-workers on strike that they must return to their jobs as teaching assistants by December 5 or else lose their \$19,000-a-year stipend. The letter issued by NYU President John Sexton also said that the university will not eliminate the graduate students'

free tuition and health benefits.

The university is attempting to sign individual contracts with each graduate student. Michael Palm, the chairman of the NYU graduate students union, has said that the membership will not end their strike without a union contract that applies to all the graduate students who work as teaching and research assistants.

The students, who are represented by Local 2110 of the United Automobile Workers, went on strike November 9 primarily to win union recognition. The last contract expired on August 31, and the administration has since refused to recognize the union. The university has been legally able to do this as a result of a 2004 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision that found that graduate students are not workers. This reversed a 2000 NLRB ruling that found that student-employees are workers, forcing NYU to recognize and negotiate a contract with the union.

Ironically, NYU's threat demonstrates that the graduate student assistants are indeed workers and are instrumental in the school's educational mission. This is expressed in Sexton's letter in justifying his ultimatum when he wrote, "The time has come for the University to insist that the academic needs of its undergraduates be met."

However, carrying out the university's threat may be easier said than done. The administration needs the cooperation of its professors to name the student assistants who have not been teaching and performing their other duties. Many departments decided before the strike that they would not assist the administration in its union-busting goal.

Canada

Windsor Library workers vote to strike

Eighty-seven employees of the Windsor Public Library voted on November 22 in favor of strike action by a margin of 90 percent. The decision is a reaction to library management's refusal to negotiate on issues around job security, wages and fair employment practices. The city in southern Ontario has announced funding cuts and branch closures and the library has been using volunteers and supply staff to perform the duties of employees, leaving unionized workers in fear for their jobs.

If a contract is not negotiated, they could be on strike early in the new year. Library workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).



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