

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 January 2006

Latin America

Betrayal in the works as Chilean miners' strike escalates

Employees of subcontractors to Chile's national copper company CODELCO escalated last week. There are now 10,000 workers on strike, up from 2,000 the week before. However, a deal has been worked out between the unions and the government of Ricardo Lagos that is a flagrant betrayal of the workers' original demands.

The strikers represent 28,000 employees of subcontractors at several copper mines in northern Chile.

Originally, the workers were demanding bonuses of about US\$1,000, approximately two and a half months' wages, due to high copper prices. In an attempt to press the administration of President Lagos, the union bureaucracy offered to drop the bonus demand for a demand that workers be compensated for unspecified past contract violations by the contractors and CODELCO.

This so-called compromise demand seems to be more palatable to the Lagos government. Draft legislation is being rushed through Congress to work out a deal that would avoid further confrontations before the January 15 presidential elections. Throughout the week, mass mobilizations of miners and their supporters have taken place in northern Chile. The police were mobilized against the protests, and scores of miners were arrested.

Most of the workers perform supporting tasks in the mines and are paid a paltry US\$400 a month, one fifth the wages of miners directly employed by CODELCO. They also work long hours and have no job security.

The strike has affected the world price of copper, which reached a record level of US\$2.11 per pound, as global investors rushed to buy copper. CODELCO management claims that production has not been affected by the strike because the strikers work in engineering, maintenance, cleanup and food provision.

Protest over sacking of banana workers in Honduras

Banana workers employed by the transnational Chiquita Bananas International went on strike last week to protest the firing of three of their comrades at a plantation in

Honduras and the suspension for 16 days of Gustavo Castro, president of the Union of America.

A spokesman for the Federation of Banana Unions reported that management has not responded to the workers' demands.

This strike takes place in the midst of a campaign by the unions for the elimination of plastic bags to wrap the banana bunches. The bags are coated with fungicides, a practice that has environmental consequences and is affecting the health of the workers that transport bunches on their backs and load the trucks that transport the bananas.

General strike call in Haiti to protest UN troops

On January 7, the National Council of Political Parties (CNPP) issued a call for a countrywide mobilization and general strike for Monday, January 9. The CNPP is demanding that so-called UN peacekeeping troops leave the country.

The CNPP is also demanding the resignation of the Provisional State Council (CEP) and of all the administrators imposed by the US invasion that overthrew President Bertrand Aristide in February 2004.

According to a report by Prensa Latina, a Cuban news agency, CNPP leaders accuse the CEP, the UN and the Organization of American States (OEA) of being impotent when it comes to tackling Haiti's economic and political crisis. Last week the CEP postponed the holding of presidential elections, which would have been held on January 8. It was the fourth postponement by the CEP, from the original date of November 13.

The call for a general strike parallels a call for businesses to close on January 9 issued by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to protest a wave of kidnappings for ransom that is taking place in Port-Au-Prince. Reginald Boulos, president of the Chamber and a multimillionaire, was a supporter of Aristide's removal.

Seven thousand troops, including soldiers from Brazil and other Latin American countries, have occupied Haiti since 2004.

United States

Hospital management retaliates against worker for whistle blowing

Management at a California hospital fired a worker who videotaped the improper disposal of biohazard waste and presented it to management. David Vega, a housekeeper at Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California, caught on videotape repeated episodes of the disposal that violated OSHA (Occupational Health and Safety) standards and endangered workers and patients alike.

Two other hospital workers were suspended for five days when they attempted to intervene with management on Vega's behalf. "All I did was ask for fairness for my co-worker, and Enloe responded in the most unfair way," said Bev Erickson, who received a suspension. "Losing five days of pay is really hard for me and my family, and it couldn't have come at a worse time because of the holidays."

One-day walkout at Connecticut nursing home

Workers at Brittany Farms Health Center in New Britain, Connecticut, conducted a 24-hour strike January 5 to protest the high cost of health care, low pay and a lack of job security. Management last proposed wage increases of 20 cents in the first year, followed by a 30-cent increase in years two and three. Workers currently make between \$9.00 and \$14.99 an hour, which is lower than other health care facilities in the region.

The 220 workers are also required to pay as much as \$166.40 every two weeks for health insurance. Workers originally voted 121-67 in August 2005 to join the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, and are seeking their first contract.

Kentucky governor calls for right-to-work legislation

Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher issued a call for right-to-work legislation at a news conference at the state capital January 6. "We must get Kentucky off the economic development no-call list," he declared. Fletcher was joined by several business executives who have agreed to push the measure, dubbed "employee choice."

Currently, Kentucky workers covered by collective bargaining agreements are not required to join unions, but they must pay dues to cover the cost of bargaining and representation. Fletcher's proposal would end the mandatory payment of representation fees.

Canada

Strike ends at Quebec ski resort

On January 3, the strike at Mont Tremblant Resort in Quebec ended after 18 days when 71.5 percent of workers voted in favor of a recommendation by a provincial government conciliator. The main issue in the strike was

wages. The new contract gives workers a 16 percent increase over five years. According to a spokesman for the union that represents the workers, Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the deal also includes the creation of a pension fund in the third year of the contract and more generous vacation entitlements.

The 1,500 striking employees, whose previous contract had expired on October 31, include hill-groomers, lift operators, cafeteria staff and housekeepers. They earn on average C\$13.90 an hour.

Newfoundland nursing home staff stage wildcat strike

About 100 nurses working at Hoyles-Escasoni seniors' complex in St John's, Newfoundland, went on a one-day wildcat strike on January 3 over the issue of overwork caused by low staffing levels. The nursing home has about 375 residents, some of whom require constant care. Due to the insufficient number of nurses, when someone is absent there is often no replacement brought in. The situation became more serious over the holidays.

The picket lines came down after only four hours, when management promised to negotiate with the union over improving staffing levels. Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) President Carol Furlong said that the regional health authority is in the process of hiring more employees to add to its casual pool.



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