

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 April 2006

## Latin America

### **Mexican miners strike in solidarity with Sicartsa victims**

Miners at the Grupo Mexico mine in Taxo, Mexico walked out on Monday in solidarity with the victims of the police attack on striking steelworkers at the Sicartsa mill in Lazaro Cardenas, Mexico and to demand the reopening of the contract to renegotiate miners' salaries.

The mine produces silver, lead and zinc. Local union secretary Miguel Martinez explained that the 400 Taxo miners, in addition to repudiating the assault on Sicartsa, are demanding higher wages, improved safety and hygienic measures in the mine, up-to-date maintenance of mining equipment and lower levels of pollution.

### **Queretaro garment workers strike**

Last Friday marked the twelfth day of a strike by 200 workers at the Lanas Merino plant in Queretaro, Mexico. Management has stonewalled workers' demands that the company bring its payments for benefits and social insurance up to date. The company's failure to make its payments has resulted in the cancellation of health insurance for the employees. Workers also report that they have been forced to work over 48 hours a week with no overtime pay.

Lanas Merino would dutifully deduct health and social insurance fees from workers paychecks without transferring them to the proper agencies.

### **University employees and professors on strike in Dominican Republic**

Students at the Autonomous State University in Santo Domingo began a vigil on Saturday in support of striking university employees. The professors and employees walked off their jobs on April 1, demanding a 30 percent wage increase.

The strikers had announced plans to begin a hunger strike to dramatize their struggle but postponed it once the students announced their intentions. Students

expressed concern that they may lose credit for the current semester.

The 7,000 strikers announced that they are considering a 10 percent wage hike to take effect next month; another 20 percent raise would occur next year. They will meet this week to vote on the offer. However, a representative of the clerical employees made it clear that acceptance of the 10 percent/20 percent offer will be conditional on improvements in non-wage benefits.

## United States

### **Mechanics strike Minnesota car dealers**

Auto mechanics at 41 car dealerships in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area went on strike April after rejecting a proposed contract over pay and job classification issues. Members of Teamsters Local 974 voted 676 to 595 to reject a proposed three-year agreement that offered annual 2 percent raises.

The Greater Metropolitan Automobile Dealers Association, which negotiates on behalf of the dealers, also put forward a controversial new job classification for mechanics called "light duty." The classification would only pay \$14.25 an hour to new hires and \$17 an hour to current journeymen mechanics compared to the rate of \$22.31 an hour that was paid under the old agreement.

### **Company re-hires immigrant workers who attended Seattle demonstration**

Seventeen painters who were fired for leaving work early to take part in a 30,000 strong rally in Seattle against anti-immigrant federal legislation were rehired last week. Laitala Enterprises, a Seattle-area painting company, negotiated their return to work with the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades.

An organizer for the union called the firing a "misunderstanding," while Mark Laitala, president of the company, said the union conceded in discussions that the walkout by the Latino workers was "inappropriate" and commented, "People are entitled to make a mistake."

Spokesmen for El Comit  Pro-Amnestia General y Justicia Social and El Centro de la Raza, however, said the workers had, indeed, received permission to attend the rally and had completed eight hours of work in six hours. Workers were hired back at their same rate of pay, but were not compensated for the time lost during their firing.

### **New Jersey union official pleads guilty to embezzlement**

A former union official pleaded guilty to embezzling \$144,000 from Local 16 of the United Service Workers of America in Newton, New Jersey. Charles Wiener, who served as president of the union from 1996 to 1999, admitted he pocketed up to \$11,500 a month for a bogus consulting position.

Charles Cart, former chairman of the Sussex County Democratic Party and Wiener's stepson, also participated in the scam that funneled \$284,000 out of the union's now-bankrupt health fund to the two conspirators.

Two others participated in the embezzlement, including Susan Donato, who subsequently assumed the position of president of Local 16. In January 2005, Donato pleaded guilty to participation in the conspiracy and cooperated with a federal investigation.

### **Workers fired at Lotus International**

Twenty workers at Lotus International in Canton, Michigan were fired April 18 after protesting poor working conditions. The company manufactures outdoor home and garden products. The Latino workers faced discrimination and complained about health and safety issues. They were not paid overtime and were forced into a pay decrease with a higher production rate. When they registered their complaints they were fired and immediately replaced. The workers are demanding their jobs back, payment of several years of overtime and a higher level of pay.

### **Canada**

#### **Ontario teachers' pension staff on strike**

Employees of the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan (OTPP) commenced A strike on April 22 after two days of negotiations. The workers are represented by of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 598. A central issue in the dispute is working conditions. According to the union's negotiator, the CEO of the OTPP "made as much money in 2005 as 100 of our members, yet he has the gall to demand a

longer workweek from our members. He has the gall to demand that a portion of staff pay be allotted to individuals hand picked by management." The 240 OTPP workers assist with investments, advise plan members of their rights and their pension options, run computer systems and provide administrative support.



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