

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 May 2006

Latin America

Peruvian workers threaten to strike world's largest gold mine

Negotiations broke down last week between management and the miners' union in Yanacocha, Peru, site of the world's largest gold mine. Union leaders announced a strike would take place as soon as union members set a date. On April 17, the miners walked out demanding better working conditions at the mine. The strike ended when the company agreed to negotiate.

The Yanacocha mine, which employs 1,000 miners, is a US-Peruvian joint venture of Newport Mining Corp. and the Buenaventura mining company. Among other things, workers are demanding the company provide affordable housing for the miners, many of whom are unable to pay rent due to poor wages, which average US\$600 per month.

Brazilian teachers strike

Public school teachers in the city of Fortaleza, Brazil, went on strike on April 29 to demand improved wages. On April 26, teachers, who are members of the Amalgamated Educator's Union (SINDIUTE), marched through downtown Fortaleza to pressure municipal authorities to address their wage demands. On April 28, following a breakdown in negotiations, a teachers' assembly overwhelmingly approved the walkout.

At issue is the teachers' demand for a wage increase to compensate a 55% loss in real wages since the last contract due to inflation. The city countered with a paltry 4 percent offer that teachers rejected.

United States

Kansas City bus drivers hold one-day strike

A quarter of all Kansas City school bus drivers walked off the job April 26 over concerns about wages, sick leave, bus maintenance and safety. About 150 of the 600 drivers launched their protest the same day the Kansas City school board voted 5-4 to extend a \$23 million annual contract to Durham School Services and First Student, ranked third and second among the largest school bus contractors in the United States. The Service

Employees International Union (SEIU) has been trying for about a year to organize the bus drivers.

Struck New York china plant reports \$2 million loss

Syracuse China announced its New York china factory, where workers have been on strike for a month, had a first-quarter loss of \$2 million and said it would not budge on its demand for a three-year wage freeze and benefit cuts. "Quite simply, we can't add to the cost of Syracuse China," said plant manager Steve Felix.

The 250 members of the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Workers International Local 381 went on strike April 1 and have twice voted down company proposals. The most recent tentative agreement, besides a wage freeze, called for an end to the defined benefit plan and retiree medical benefits for new hires. That agreement was defeated by a 150-80 margin.

Contract talks are scheduled to resume May 8. Syracuse China was purchased in 1995 by Toledo-based Libbey for more than \$40 million.

Strike at New York aircraft parts plant

About 150 workers walked off the job April 29 at a Goodrich Corp. plant in Rome, New York. The work stoppage came after talks between the United Steelworkers Local 4831 and management failed to reach agreement on wages and workers' portion of health care contributions. Goodrich, based out of North Carolina, employs more than 21,000 workers at more than 100 facilities in 16 countries. The Rome plant makes parts for helicopters and other aircraft.

Protesters arrested at New York University rally

Fifty-seven striking teaching assistants and their supporters were arrested for civil disobedience on April 27 in a demonstration called by the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) to demand that New York University (NYU) recognize their union and negotiate a new contract. The police moved in after the strikers and those in solidarity with them sat down in the middle of Washington Square North.

Almost 1,000 graduate student-workers, members of Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers (UAW), went on

strike November 9 last year after the university refused to recognize their union. The last contract expired on August 31. The administration has refused to recognize or negotiate with the union due to a 2004 National Labor Relations Board decision that teaching assistants are not workers, but students and private universities such as NYU are not obligated to recognize and negotiate with their union. However, these graduate students have a heavy workload as teaching and research assistants in universities throughout the country.

Rally leaders announced that the American Arbitration Association had certified that about 500 of the 900 union members had signed a petition recognizing the UAW as their bargaining agent. However, the university claims that there are only about 25 graduate student workers still engaged in the job action while the union is claiming that 200 remain on strike.

After the rally, an NYU-appointed committee recommended a new official advocacy group for graduate students. GSOC spokesperson Susan Valentine rejected this proposal as a substitute for union recognition and restated their demand that the university recognize the UAW local and negotiate a new contract.

Waste management strikers expand their walkout

On strike since April 3, and making no headway in negotiations against Waste Management, Inc., a private trash-hauling company, 123 strikers—members of Teamsters Local 813—extended their picket lines on April 27 to 15 garbage-hauling and transfer sites either owned or operated by the company in the New York metropolitan area. Workers from Laborers Local 108 and Teamsters Union Local 813 said they are honoring the picket lines.

The union has estimated that the expansion of the strike could affect nearly 60,000 commercial customers. However, a company spokesman, David Tooley, has claimed the company's trash-hauling operations have been continuing "with replacement drivers since the first day." The company is looking at the possibility of making these replacements permanent, Tooley warned.

The major issue in the strike is health benefits, with the union complaining that the company is seeking to increase the cost of medical benefits to individual workers while decreasing their coverage. The company is also demanding that it no longer pay overtime for Saturday work.

According to a union press release announcing the expansion of the job action, Waste Management, based in Houston, Texas, made more than \$1 billion in profits last

year. The company also posted \$3.37 billion in revenues for the fourth quarter of 2005, an increase of 5.1 percent from the fourth quarter of 2004. The statement also stated that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, garbage haulers are three times more likely to be killed on the job than either police officers or firefighters. The Teamsters say 8,500 members working for Waste Management throughout the country have been involved in protests.

Canada

Deal struck in Winnipeg bus factory strike

On April 28, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 3003 reached a tentative agreement with management of New Flyer Industries, a heavy-duty bus manufacturer in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The deal was reached two days after a conciliator was appointed at the union's request, and it will end a 24-day strike if workers ratify the contract.

The vote was set for April 30. The CAW leadership has recommended that workers accept the deal, details of which will be released after the vote is counted.

New Flyer produces about 1,500 buses a year and also has two plants in Minnesota. Thirty-seven percent of the workforce at the Winnipeg plant is unionized. The last strike in 1974 lasted six months.

Ontario educational assistants set to strike

More than 800 educational assistants at the Thames Valley District school board west of Toronto are set to strike on May 4 if a deal is not reached between the board and their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4222, Unit C. Negotiations broke off on April 26.

The educational assistants provide daily classroom care for children with learning disabilities and severe medical needs. They are demanding that they be paid for up to seven hours a day, which would give them parity with educational assistants at the nearby private London District Catholic school board. London educational assistants currently earn about C\$20 an hour and are paid for up to six hours a day.



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