

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 May 2006

Latin America

Miners strike in Surinam

Nine hundred fifty gold miners are on strike at the Rosebel mine in Surinam, the former colony of Dutch Guiana. The mine is property of Cambior, a Montreal-based transnational corporation. Management claims that the strike is illegal and is appealing that Surinam's courts issue an injunction against the strike. It also claims that the miners' demands have not been made clear. The strike at this open-pit mine, located 60 miles south of Paranaibo, Surinam's capital city, began on May 17.

Mexican steel workers mark twentieth anniversary of privatization

On Saturday May 20, former workers of the Monterrey Iron and Steel Foundry set up picket lines at a public park in this city to mark the closure of the facility twenty years ago. At the time it was the largest metal foundry in Latin America. The closure of the foundry was the beginning of the so-called industrial re-conversion, the name given the introduction of laissez-faire policies and the wholesale privatization of large sections of the Mexican economy.

The closure of Monterrey Iron and Steel on May 10, 1986, left 10,000 workers unemployed. While the workers had been promised new jobs in a reinvigorated industrial sector—freed from 'government mismanagement'—a great number of them were blacklisted by Monterrey's employers associations, which accused workers of being "spoiled" by old-labor management relations. Prior to the privatization, the workers had been blamed for lack of productivity. Since then Mexican capitalists have perfected the tactics of slandering, blacklisting and locking out workers as they press to reduce wages, benefits working conditions.

Last weekend's protesters issued a press statement on the mine explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in February, which left 65 workers dead. The statement

blamed the Mexican government, management and union officials for the unsafe working conditions that caused the disaster. It demanded that miners' union leader Napoleon Gomez be indicted and tried for his role in the incident. At the same time the workers denounced government intervention in the miners union, which, according the communiqué, will only lead to the imposition of yet another treacherous leadership.

United States

Workers at Tennessee nuclear plant strike over benefits

Some 370 members of the United Steelworkers Local 05-677 struck the nuclear facility at Erwin, Tennessee, May 16 over a variety of benefit concessions demanded by Nuclear Fuel Services Inc. (NFS). Workers "overwhelmingly" rejected the six-year contract proposal, according to the local union president, Roger Birchfield.

NFS is looking to eliminate the pension plan for all new employees and alter retirement and health insurance plans by raising co-payments. The last strike at the Erwin facility occurred in 1985 and lasted for more than 11 months. NFS supplies nuclear fuel for both military and civilian uses.

Pennsylvania oil workers union ends walkout after threat to replace strikers

Oil refinery workers in Karns City, Pennsylvania, voted to end their three-month strike May 16 and return to work after their company Penreco threatened to hire permanent replacements for the 129 strikers, who are members of United Steelworkers Local 889. The labor bureaucracy isolated Penreco workers after the company made clear it would not honor the pattern agreement established by Shell Oil Company.

"As soon as we heard about the threat of permanent replacements, we thought it was in our best interests to go back," Local 889 President Marty Henry told Derrick.com. "We will move forward and continue to

work hard to keep this company profitable.”

Under the new three-year agreement, workers will receive annual raises of 2.5 percent. The old pattern agreement called for raises of 3.5, 3.5, and 3.7 percent. In the area of health care, Penreco also gutted the old agreement. According to Local 889, a worker who is hospitalized will end up paying \$3,000 or more in out-of-pocket costs.

During the course of the three-month strike, at least three workers were arrested in picket line confrontations with security guards.

Union representing locked-out Armco steelworkers appeals to Wall Street investors

Brian Daley, president of Armco Employees Independent Federation (AEIF), which represents workers locked out at AK Steel’s Middletown Works in Southwest Ohio for nearly three months, went to Wall Street last week to make a presentation to steel industry analysts hoping to pressure the company into a compromise. Daley did not divulge the names of those he met, except to say they were “reputable Wall Street analysts and investors.”

The company locked out its 2,400 unionized employees on February 28 and has since attempted to operate the facility with strikebreakers. Earlier this month a replacement worker died after being struck by a coal cart.

Speaking at the company’s annual shareholders’ meeting in Chicago, AK Steel chairman, president and CEO James Wainscott said, “The AEIF is out of touch with reality.” He called for a “new era” labor agreement, saying, “That means we need fewer employees, fewer job classes, defined contribution pensions and active and retiree health care cost sharing.”

Canada

BC teachers union threatens strike

On May 19 the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) cancelled scheduled contract talks and announced a strike vote would be held June 7-8. Contract talks are expected to resume on May 24, but the union president said that the employer’s wage offer was an insult that didn’t even cover increases in the cost of living.

The employer offer included a wage increase of eight percent over four years, while the BCTF is demanding 24 percent over three years, to bring BC teachers into

parity with their counterparts in Ontario and Alberta.

The union also objected to salary grid adjustments and the pay proposal for substitute teachers—demands that were part of the preliminary report issued by government-appointed mediator Vince Ready following the two-week “illegal” strike last October. That strike was in reaction to a law the provincial Liberals imposed on teachers, which froze wages for two years—from June 30, 2004 to June 30, 2006.



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