

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 June 2006

## Latin America

### Colombia: Coal miners strike ends

On June 23, negotiators for 3,700 striking miners—members of the National Union of Energy and Mine Industry Workers (SINTRAMIEN)—reached an agreement with the Drummond mining transnational company, ending a 32-day strike that had shut down the Cesar and Puerto de Cienaga coal mines.

The two-year contract was brokered by the Ministry of Social Protection. It contains an 8 percent raise the first year and a second year raise of 1.5 percent over this year's rate of inflation, expected to be 4 percent.

Drummond management indicated that in return for the wage increase, SINTRANMIEN agreed to a "labor stability" clause that commits the union to police the workers and imposes penalties on workers that disobey.

### Chilean meatpackers strike

Meatpackers in the city of Valdivia in Chile's southern region walked off their jobs on June 23 at midnight in protest over an impasse in negotiations on wages and benefits. The workers, employed by the Frival Company, are members of the Union of Valdivia Meatpackers (SFRIVAL).

SFRIVAL officer Patricio Toledo indicated that the company has expanded and become more profitable. "Obviously, workers want to grow with the company," indicated Toledo.

When negotiations broke down, workers were demanding an increase of 35,000 pesos (US\$63) a month, down from their original demand of 50,000 pesos (US\$ 90), a far cry from management's latest offer of 15,000 pesos (US\$27).

### Honduras teachers strike

Fifteen thousand public school teachers walked off their jobs last Thursday. The 24-hour protest by teachers in the provinces of Francisco Morazán and Cortés included a 5-kilometer march in Tegucigalpa. Teachers rallied across from the Presidents House to protest against President Manuel Zelaya.

Honduran teachers are demanding higher wages and better working conditions. Currently, teachers earn less than US\$300 a month and are demanding a 50 percent raise.

### Iron miners strike in Peru

Seven hundred iron miners, employed by Shougang Hierro Peru (SHP), walked off their jobs last Monday demanding a daily wage hike of US\$1.70. Negotiations are at an impasse, with SHP offering US\$0.57 an hour. Peruvian authorities have declared the strike illegal and signaled their intention of imposing a mandatory settlement.

Strikers indicated that their daily pay of US\$13 is far below the industry average wage of US\$33.

### Petrochemical truck drivers strike in Dominican Republic

Two hundred truck drivers who transport petrochemical products went on strike last Thursday demanding a wage increase. The drivers work for 13 companies that distribute fuel and other petroleum derivatives. The 13 firms operate as a cartel. The 200 workers represent a third of all the drivers in this industry. However, the strike is expected to produce fuel shortages across the country.

Both sides are appealing to the Dominican government that it intervene on their behalf. The drivers are paid 5 percent of revenue, US\$40 per load. They are demanding that their share be raised to 10 percent.

### United States

#### Nurse fired after radio ad

A nurse at Finely Hospital in Dubuque, Iowa, was fired after a pro-union radio ad and one day after the facility's 300 nurses voted to launch a three-day strike June 21 over stalled contract negotiations. Alice Weick, a veteran nurse of 30 years and vice president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 199, addressed reporters at a press conference: "It was not about my nursing skills that I was fired. It was not

about what I did for my patients. It was all about because I chose to speak my concern.”

Weick had stated in the radio ad that the hospital was not “putting patients first” and asked supporters to call Finley executives and declare their support for nurses.

Weick was called into the offices of Finley’s vice president of nursing services where a recording of the ad was played for her. At the conclusion, she was asked whether she still agreed with those comments. After answering yes, management fired her and escorted her off company property.

Finley nurses are seeking a 6 percent wage increase as opposed to the 3 percent offered by hospital management and want language to guarantee just-cause discipline. Management is preparing to use professional strikebreakers should an agreement not be reached after a 10-day strike notice expires.

### **Workers rally against New Jersey Democrat’s call for reopening state contract**

About 500 workers rallied outside the statehouse in Trenton, New Jersey, June 23 to protest demands made by state Senator Stephen Sweeney to cut workers’ salaries and benefits by 15 percent. Sweeney, a former labor bureaucrat in the building trades and now head of the state Senate Labor Committee, has issued a call for state workers to reopen their contracts one year before their expiration in order to introduce a two-tier system that will slash workers’ living standards.

The building trades announced it supported Sweeney’s recommendations.

### **Canada**

#### **Diamond miners reach deal**

The union representing the 375 workers at Ekati diamond mine in Northwest Territories reached a tentative agreement with BHP Billiton on June 23, 11 weeks after the beginning of their strike. The details of the one-year deal were not disclosed, but Ekati management said it includes salary increases, increased paid personal leave, incentive pay and bonuses. It is unclear to what extent the deal addressed the main issues in the strike—layoffs by seniority and job security. The atmosphere during the strike was tense, with both sides accusing the other of unfair practices. At one point, a deal was accepted by the bargaining committee only to be rejected by the members.

The Ekati mine on Lac de Gras, 300 kilometers northeast of Yellowknife and 200 kilometers south of

the Arctic Circle, opened in 1998. It is operated by BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining company, based in Australia and formed in a 2001 merger of Australian Broken Hill Proprietary Co. (BHP) and British company Billiton.

### **Toronto racetrack workers strike**

Mutuel clerks working for Woodbine racetrack in Toronto went on strike after their 600-member Canadian Racetrack Workers Union rejected a contract proposal from track owner Woodbine Entertainment Group on June 21, four days before the track’s signature race. The workers’ last contract expired at the end of 2005. The main issue in the strike is scheduling and seniority for full-time staff.

The previous strike at the Woodbine racetrack preceded the 1996 Breeders’ Cup, when the track locked out mutuel clerks just before that event. The dispute was resolved before the race.



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