

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 July 2006

Latin America

Copper miners end strike at Mexico's largest mine

Workers at the Cananea mine in Sonora, Mexico agreed to end their solidarity strike, two days after the Mexican government authorized Grupo Mexico SA to close the La Caridad mine and rescind its collective bargaining agreement with 2,000 striking miners at that location. La Caridad miners had been on strike since March, in the wake of the Pasta de Conchos mine disaster that left 65 coal miners dead, to demand better working conditions and an end to government intervention in their union's internal affairs. It is not clear if Grupo Mexico actually intends to carry out the closure or is using this measure as a way of firing the workers and ending the strike.

The 1,500 Cananea miners walked out on June 2 to support the La Caridad strikers. The Cananea strike was sparked by management's refusal to give half of the miners a day off to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the historic strike of 1906 that paved the way for the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Grupo Mexico agreed to pay the miners half of the wages lost during the strike, drop any criminal charges against strikers, agree to a productivity bonus, and recognize June 1 as a holiday from now on.

Striking teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico block access to hotels

On Saturday, July 15, striking Oaxaca public school teachers blocked access to four hotels in this southern Mexican city. They also blocked the bus depot. The teachers went on strike May 22 demanding higher wages. Since then they have added to the wage demand the demand for the resignation of Oaxaca's governor, Ulises Ruiz. The teachers and their supports have faced violent repression from state authorities.

Public health doctors strike in Guatemala

A strike by public health doctors that began June 10 has now extended to 16 public hospitals. The protesters are demanding that the government increase the hospital's budget for medicine and that the country's overall public health budget be raised from 0.98 percent to 4 percent of gross domestic output. They are also demanding the approval of legislation that would give doctors a salary increase. Last week, Guatemalan President Oscar Berger

threatened to fire the strikers. "If you don't work, you should not get paid and we cannot force doctors back to work," declared Berger.

Chilean fishery workers strike

Four hundred twenty employees of AquaChile, the second-largest salmon farm in the world, went on strike and occupied the facilities on July 10. The workers complain of substandard wages while the company enjoys large profits. The strike was sparked by management's refusal to grant workers a cost-of-living increase that would partially make up for inflation. The workers are also demanding a 26,000 peso raise (US\$48). Base wages for the salmon workers fluctuate between 90 and 114 thousand pesos. Union leader Marisol Rosas indicated that their wage demand amounts to only a loaf and a half of bread per day. "The company has grown enormously," she said, "they now want to reduce our productivity bonus; this would mean a 40,000 peso wage cut."

On Saturday the workers ended their occupation of the farm when the government sent 100 police to throw out the 20 workers occupying the facility. Though the workers agreed to willingly abandon the occupation, two were arrested and one was injured when a pregnant worker was hit with a wooden baton across her back. Rosas declared that the strike would continue.

United States

Flight attendants union accepts huge concessions at Northwest Airlines

The leadership of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) has agreed to \$200 million in wage concessions and work rule changes being demanded by Northwest Airlines. A bankruptcy judge had given Northwest permission to impose a contract on Monday that 80 percent of flight attendants had rejected last month. The union had threatened to strike if that happened.

Northwest filed for bankruptcy protection in September, and has extracted over a billion dollars in annual labor cost reductions from its unions. The union representing 7,300 flight attendants was the last at Northwest without a new contract.

Rank-and-file flight attendants voted out their previous union—theProfessionalFlightAttendantsAssociation—earlier

this month, in hopes that bringing in the AFL-CIO-affiliated Association of Flight Attendants would improve their bargaining position.

The massive concessions at Northwest Airlines are the inevitable outcome of the sabotage of the 2005 airline mechanics' strike by every faction of the labor bureaucracy, from the AFL-CIO, to the Change to Win coalition and independent unions.

Court gives Mesaba Airlines permission to throw out union contracts

A bankruptcy court judge ruled July 14 that Mesaba Airlines can impose a new contract on three of its unions in an effort to reduce expenses by \$66.4 million—including \$17.1 million in labor costs—in order to emerge from bankruptcy. The ruling came with a stipulation that the carrier must give 10 days notice, a measure designed to intensify pressure on workers to accept givebacks.

Mesaba filed for bankruptcy in October 2005, one month after its senior partner Northwest Airlines declared bankruptcy. Mesaba serves as a feeder airline to Northwest and flies into about 98 Midwest cities. The airline is expected to run out of cash by September and is seeking to cut 19.4 percent of the wages and benefits from its 1,300 flight attendants, pilots and mechanics. Unions representing Mesaba workers are arguing for an 8 percent cut.

Northwest ground workers oust union official

Ground workers at Northwest Airlines voted out International Association of Machinists District 143 president Bobby DePace after the union pushed through a contract that cut 645 jobs and cut pay by 11.5 percent. No vote totals were released in the union election that saw DePace replaced by Steven Gordon, a cargo handler at Detroit's Metropolitan Airport.

Despite the devastating losses suffered by Northwest workers and Gordon's call for new leadership, the incoming president praised DePace's role in the union. "I can assure you that the negotiators did the best possible job that they could with this contract. These are terrible times in the aviation industry."

DePace played a despicable role during the strike by 4,000 mechanics at Northwest, sanctioning scabbing on members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Organization and seeking to unionize the replacement workers hired by Northwest.

Last month, pilots at Northwest Airlines removed Air Line Pilots Association head Mark McClain, who also pushed heavy concessions on behalf of the company. In 2005, McClain led the stampede toward concessions at Northwest, declaring, "The fact is our company is in financial jeopardy, and the other unions need to join us in an effort to ensure NWA's viability." DePace sounded his agreement, adding,

"I can understand what Mark is saying. There is an urgency."

Two workers die in separate industrial accidents

Two workers died in separate incidents in Maryland and Illinois. Raymond Walk, an assistant plant manager, was killed when he became trapped inside a conveyer machine at P. Flanigan & Sons in Westport, Maryland. Walk was only discovered after a second employee was unable to make radio contact with him and went to investigate.

Meanwhile, Matthew Lavery died after suffering severe burns over his entire body when a boiler exploded at the Tate and Lyle plant in Decatur, Illinois. Another Tate and Lyle worker and a contract employee also suffered burns in the explosion and were sent to the burn unit at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration are investigating both accidents.

Canada

Ontario school board files for lockout deadline

On July 10 management at the Upper Canada District School Board filed documents with the Ministry of Labour to start the countdown to an August 1 deadline for a strike or lockout. The school board rejected calls for negotiations by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 5678, which represents affected workers, instead demanding concessions and takeaways from workers. Union members had already voted to strike if a settlement could not be reached. Mediation talks are scheduled for July 31.

CUPE Local 5678 represents 1,400 clerical, education assistants, instructional assistants, plant, custodial and maintenance, information technology, transportation, library and support staff in schools across Eastern Ontario.

Tentative deal in Pepsi bottling company strike

About 60 striking workers were scheduled to vote July 16 on the tentative agreement reached between their employer, Browning Harvey Ltd., and the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) Local 7003. Browning Harvey manufactures and distributes Pepsi products in the Maritime Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Its employees in Grand Falls-Windsor, Corner Brook and St. John's went on strike on May 29, trying to negotiate better severance packages for workers that will be laid off due to the introduction of new machinery at the bottling plants. Their previous contract expired May 27.



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