

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 July 2006

Latin America

Strike continues at Chilean salmon fish farm

Striking workers of AquaChile will vote this week on whether to continue their job action. The company is standing firm on its last offer and no negotiations are taking place. Last week provincial authorities attempted to mediate between management and the strikers with no results. Beginning this week AquaChile has the legal right to replace the strikers.

The workers are demanding a monthly increase of 26,000 pesos. AquaChile management claims that it cannot afford to increase workers' wages because it is committed to long-term contracts with its customers. It also claims that its wages are among the highest in the industry.

Some strikers have gotten ill from picketing under the cold temperatures of the south Chilean winter. The workers had occupied the fish farm up until July 14, when police took over the facility, injuring a pregnant striker and arresting seven others.

AquaChile is the second largest salmon farm in the world.

Uruguayan football players threaten to strike

Professional football (soccer) players, represented by the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF), are threatening to strike over stalled negotiations on a statute that would establish new owner-player rules. AUF leaders indicated last week that the new football season would not begin until the statute is negotiated and approved by both parties.

Oaxaca teachers continue protests, demand governor resign

Striking teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico are continuing their protests demanding the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Hundreds of teachers, members of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), have occupied Central Oaxaca and have set up picket lines in front of Oaxaca's major hotels.

The strike began to press for a 20 percent wage increase. In June, in the wake of a violent repression of a teachers' protest, the teachers added the demand for the resignation of Ruiz.

Ruiz is accused of vote fraud in the 2004 elections and of using armed goon squads against opponents. Last week, a 10-person goon squad machine-gunned a university radio station that supports the strikers and threw a gasoline bomb at the house of one of the SNTE leaders. The assailants were widely speculated to be under Ruiz's control.

Oaxaca business leaders, facing a drop in tourism, have appealed to the government of Vicente Fox to force the teachers back to work.

Escondida copper miners threaten to strike

Workers at Chile's Escondida copper mine have announced that they will take a strike vote unless management changes its wage offer. The facility, the world's largest copper mine, is owned by the British-Australian transnational BHP-Billiton.

The miners have been "working to rule" since the beginning of July to press the company to raise its wage offer, but management has not budged. Pedro Marin, secretary of the union at the mine, accused the company of stonewalling negotiations. Workers are demanding a 13 percent wage hike and a 16 million peso productivity bonus, plus improvements in health and education benefits. Miners have rejected management's offer of 1.5 percent in wages and a 4.5 million peso bonus.

Miners point out that when the last contract was signed, in 2003, copper was selling for US\$0.67 a pound. Last week, a pound of copper sold for US\$3.68. The contract at Escondida will expire August 2.

Mexican auto workers reject contract "flexibilization"

Workers at the Volkswagen plant in Puebla, Mexico last week rejected modifications to their collective bargaining agreement. José Luis Rodríguez Salazar,

general secretary of the Independent Auto Industry Workers Union at Volkswagen (SITIAVW), declared that the workers are determined to strike if the automaker insists on changes to the contract in the name of labor flexibility.

Volkswagen is demanding greater productivity and quality. Rodriguez warned that a strike could spark wider social conflicts in Puebla. However Rodriguez left the door open for a compromise with management on these issues in return for a bigger wage package. VW employs 9,800 workers at its Puebla operations.

United States

Rail maintenance workers strike in Michigan and Ohio

Some 250 rail maintenance workers struck the Canadian National Railway's (CN) operations in Michigan and northwest Ohio on July 19 after 18 months of bargaining were upset by new proposals from the company. The Teamsters' Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division also initiated a lawsuit charging CN with bad-faith bargaining.

Mediated bargaining sessions continued from December 2004 to March 2006. At that point, according to the union, CN submitted new proposals that would eliminate existing seniority rights leading to the subcontracting out of all maintenance of way work and the imposition of annual health insurance contributions.

CN is seeking a federal court injunction to halt the work stoppage on the grounds that it is illegal. The company is seeking to maintain its rail operations during the strike using management personnel.

Oil refinery workers strike over time off

Workers at Marathon Petroleum Company in St. Paul Park, Minnesota set up picket lines July 19 to protest company attempts to reduce workers' time-off and make some work nonunion. About 170 members of the Teamsters complain that under the current agreement they only get three days off per month and that Marathon's current proposal will further reduce that time.

"The company here has been making big, record profits in the last few years and making millions and billions of dollars.... The employer does not want to properly maintain staffing levels of the plant, they want to force our employees to work on their day off," one worker told a KSTP news reporter. The Marathon

facility in St. Paul Park refines tens of thousands of barrels of crude oil each day, creating gasoline, diesel fuel, kerosene and asphalt.

California county workers push for better contract terms

Sacramento County workers walked off their jobs and packed the chambers of the county's Board of Supervisors July 18 to protest stalled contract negotiations. Initially, board members refused to enter the chamber, citing safety concerns under conditions where over 800 workers from some 25 bargaining units completely filled all seats and crowded the aisles while carrying on chants like, "'Board of supes show your face, save the county from disgrace.'"

Once aisles were cleared and the meeting began, workers booed and hissed at county officials and carried on with chants like, "Three percent, won't pay the rent," and "Strike, strike, strike." The county is currently proposing a five-year contract with a 3 percent increase in the first year and subsequent raises of 2 to 5 percent based on inflation. The county is also seeking increases in employee co-payments.

Canada

Alberta school workers serve strike notice

On July 20 workers at the Livingstone Range School Division in Lethbridge, Alberta served strike notice to the school trustees after being given a lockout notice by their employer. The 110 workers, who include custodial, secretarial and other school support workers, are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2133.

CUPE has been in negotiations with the school division since June 2005, trying to get the trustees to limit the use of contractors and casual employees in the school system. According to the CUPE Alberta president, the local is not setting up picket lines since the vast majority of its members are off on summer break. The strike is technically effective July 24.



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