

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 August 2006

Latin America

Colombian oil workers protest Ecopetrol privatization

On July 28 scores of Ecopetrol employees blocked the company's headquarters in Bogota to protest the sale of 20 percent of the company to private capitalists. Ecopetrol is Colombia's government-owned oil company, the largest public company in the nation. On July 25 the oil workers union rejected calls for a one-day general strike and instead chose forms of protest that would not jeopardize Ecopetrol's oil 538,000-barrel-a-day oil production or its refining of oil products.

Last week Colombian President Alvaro Uribe announced the partial sale, assuring Colombians that the government did not intend to fully privatize Ecopetrol, but to increase investment in new technologies. The Workers Syndicalist Union (USO) position is that what is being promoted as a "capitalization" of the company is indeed a step toward privatization of the firm.

USO President Jorge Gamboa declared that the union intends to appeal to the Colombian congress to block the sale and that it also intended to organize more protest marches and rallies. As an alternative to privatization, Gamboa is proposing that the government grant Ecopetrol greater autonomy from the government, to allow it to reinvest its profits back into the company.

Salvadoran trade unions denounce persecution

The Salvadoran Trade Union Federation (FSS) reported last week to the government's Human Rights Department (PDH) on a campaign of systematic persecution of trade union leaders and destruction of trade union locals.

Attacks and death threats are being carried out by a fascist group that calls itself "The Life Movement for Democracy" (MVD). Government and education workers in particular are being targeted by the MVD.

FSS leader Adan Calderon said that a series of attacks are a sign that "death squads" have been reconstituted. In the 1970s and 1980s death squads operated against trade union supporters and left-wing activists, part of the civil war that had the country in its grip. The death squads

were supported, financed and advised by the CIA. Calderon called on the PDH to investigate the reports and to make the international public aware of this persecution.

Strike vote by Chilean copper miners

More than 97 percent of the 2,000 miners employed at the Escondida mine, the world's largest copper mine, voted to go on strike last Friday. The decision to strike follows stalled contract talks. The price of copper has tripled in the last three years and miners' leaders report that Escondida management refuses to address their demands for higher wages, bonuses and benefits to reflect this explosion in the international price of copper. A walkout by the miners is expected to drive the price of copper even higher. This price effect will be compounded by the closure of the Chuquicamata mine, due to the collapse of a section of that mine that may take up to two months to repair.

Management officials appealed to the Chilean government and managed to obtain a cooling-off order that postpones the strike until August 7. The mine is located in the Atacama Desert of Northern Chile and produces 8 percent of the world's copper supply.

Varig airlines announces mass layoffs, employees walk out

The Brazilian airline company Varig announced last Friday that it would sack 5,500 employees, 57 percent of its workforce. The layoffs are part of a reorganization plan to get the bankrupt carrier back on its feet. Varig also announced that it would fly only 10 airplanes and limit its operations to the Brazilian cities of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Fortaleza, Salvador, Recife and Manaus. Internationally it will limit itself to Buenos Aires and Frankfurt.

Three months ago Varig stopped paying its workers. At that time it handled 68 percent of international flights from Brazil. In June, management announced that it was in arrears on its lease payments for 59 airplanes and began bankruptcy proceedings with the courts, which split the company in two. The new Varig was acquired by the US-based Matlin Patterson investment house and a group of

Brazilian investors for US\$24 million—a fraction of what its assets are worth. The other company will be a small, one-route company that calls itself Nordeste. The latter will have only 50 employees.

The company promised to pay back wages for the 3,985 workers that will be retained by the company but said nothing about the sacked employees' pay. However, airline experts say the new company will only need about 1,000 workers, suggesting that the sackings will continue.

The announcement caused a strike by 400 employees at the company's biggest hub in the city of Sao Paulo. The strikers are demanding their back wages.

United States

New Jersey nurses end strike

Nurses at the Englewood Hospital and Medical Center in Englewood, New Jersey, have ended their month-long strike and ratified a new three-year contract. The strike by the 660 nurses was provoked when hospital management attempted to replace their pension plan with an inferior 401(k) retirement savings plan.

The pension plan for current nurses was retained with certain modifications, such as a two-year freeze on service credits. However, new nurses hired after January 1, 2007 will be excluded from the pension plan and limited to a 401(k) plan. The contract includes 11 percent salary increases over a three-year period, higher nurse-to-patient ratios, flexible schedules and a mentoring program.

Air traffic controllers charge staffing shortage in Chicago airport near-collision

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association charged staffing shortages at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport were "linked" to the near-collision last week of an air cargo plane and a Boeing 747 passenger jet. An air traffic controller responsible for both planes was alerted by a co-worker to the danger and radioed pilots of the passenger jet who carried out a last-second maneuver to avoid colliding with the cargo plane by 200 to 300 feet.

The Federal Aviation Administration blamed the controller for the near mishap. However, the FAA admitted that a safety system that alerts controllers to potential collisions was not up and running due to its staff undergoing training.

The incident comes on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the 1981 strike by 11,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), whose walkout over staffing and other issues was broken by the Reagan administration.

Canada

Abbotsford city workers' strike ends

Municipal workers on strike for 24 days against the City of Abbotsford, about 70 km southeast of Vancouver, British Columbia, ratified on July 29 an agreement reached between the City Council and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 774. The 463 unionized employees, who work in parks and recreation, sewer, water, city vehicle maintenance, city hall administration, taxation, bylaw enforcement, and fees and licenses, commenced the strike on June 26 after more than a year of negotiations. The main issues were wages, the length of the contract and job security.

The new five-year contract, retroactive to January 1, 2005, includes a general wage increase of 3 percent per year from 2005 through 2008 and 3.5 percent in 2009.

The city will also match the average wage settlement negotiated for 2009 by local governments of Chilliwack, Mission and Langley Township if they are greater than 3.5 percent.

Labrador nickel mine closed by strike

One hundred seventeen workers at Voisey's Bay nickel mine in Labrador walked off the job July 28 after negotiations with the mine owner, Inco Ltd., broke down the previous day. The workers, who are members of the United Steelworkers, handle heavy equipment and work in the mine's mill. Contract talks had been going on for over a year over the issue of wage parity with Ontario workers. According to the union, mine workers employed by Inco in Sudbury, Ontario earn an hourly wage of at least \$24, while those at Voisey's Bay make only \$19 an hour. Voisey's Bay employs more than 200 additional workers, mainly in the service sector, who are members of other unions. Their union contract prevents them from honoring other unions' picket lines.

Inco Ltd., which has headquarters in Toronto, is the world's second largest producer of nickel. In addition to the Sudbury and Voisey's Bay mines, it owns and operates two nickel mines in Thompson, Manitoba.



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