

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 August 2006

## Latin America

### Chilean miners strike

On August 7, 2052 miners at the Escondida mine, the world's largest open pit copper mine, went on strike following the collapse of negotiations with management. The talks had been mediated by the government of Michelle Bachelet, Chile's Socialist Party president. The miners plan to mobilize and rally to publicize their demand for better wages. Union leaders announced that the miners were prepared to remain on strike for two months.

Management's latest offer of a 3 percent wage hike coupled with bonuses was rejected by the workers. They are demanding a 13 percent rise and additional bonuses.

The strike is expected to have a significant impact on international copper markets, despite management's intention to keep the mine open with 748 temporary miners that normally work for the company but do not belong to the union. Escondida produces 1.3 million tons of copper annually, 8 percent of the world's production. It is 87.5 percent owned by the British-Canadian BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining group, and by Rio Tinto, another mining transnational firm.

### Peruvian iron ore miners to walk out

Over 600 iron miners, subcontracted by Shougang Iron, are set to strike Tuesday. The workers are demanding a wage increase that would place them at the same level as unionized workers at the mine. Currently subcontract workers earn US\$8.20 per day. Permanent contract workers earn US\$14.00 per day.

A seven-day strike at the mine ended after the Peruvian government ordered both parties to settle for a US\$1.00 raise. The settlement did not include subcontract workers, which comprise the majority of the miners at the site.

### Oil workers protest in Colombia

Employees of Ecopetrol, Colombia's state-owned oil

company, carried out a 24-hour strike last Thursday to protest government plans to sell 20 percent of the company to private capitalists. The oil workers union (USO) strongly suspects that this is the first step toward the privatization of the company.

USO leaders announced that last week's strike was the first of many days of protest and indicated that a general strike may be called by the nation's unions.

Management sources claimed the strike was only partially observed in the Barrancabermeja and Cartagena refineries. The USO denied management's claim and declared that the protest had been widely observed.

### Honduran teachers on strike

Sixty-one thousand Honduran teachers walked off their jobs on July 24. Teachers are demanding a wage of US\$3.07 an hour plus US\$1.16 per class. The government of President Manuel Zelaya is offering a US\$0.10 raise. Currently teachers earn about US\$2.00

### United States

### Study indicates 9/11 rescuers suffered lung damage

A study being conducted at Montefiore Medical Center in New York of 12,000 rescue workers involved in the 9/11 disaster indicates those present in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers suffered significantly more lung damage from airborne particles than those present at later stages. The afflictions are being equated to 12 years of age-related respiratory damage.

Because firefighters have been receiving routine lung tests every 18 months since 1997, the researchers have been able to measure respiratory functions before and after the 9/11 attacks. Out of 12,079 rescue workers exposed at Ground Zero during the first year, 13.7 percent arrived on the morning of the disaster and were exposed to the most amount of dust. Another 67.8 percent arrived two days later and 16 percent were present on the third day.

Those exposed in the first two days to the collapse had more severe respiratory symptoms than those arriving later. Although 22 percent of those early arrivals report using a mask—with this figure rising to 50 percent on the third day—researchers found that use of masks did not have a protective effect.

### **Waste Management strike ends**

A nearly four-month walkout by 115 garbage collecting workers in New York ended when the strikers agreed to a settlement negotiated between the company and Local 813 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The major concession obtained by the company in the new settlement is that workers must now contribute premiums for their existing health benefits, one of the major issues that provoked the strike on April 3. The settlement was achieved with the assistance of a federal mediator.

Waste Management is a nationwide trash-hauling company based in Houston, Texas. It collects garbage from 10,000 commercial businesses in New York City and Westchester County. Supporting the company as soon as the walkout began, Mayor Michael Bloomberg stated that the city would pick up the garbage if the company was unable to do so. However, it has been reported that the company was able to function during the strike with a temporary scab force.

A spokesman for Waste Management has claimed that it has lost 20,000 customers to smaller nonunionized trash-hauling companies since the 1990s and therefore needed givebacks from its unionized workers. A union spokesman has replied that the company gave up on these routes because they were unprofitable, but the company nationwide has made a profit of \$1.2 billion on revenues of \$13.1 billion, and could afford to give the workers a good contract. During the strike, the National Labor Relations Board on two occasions rejected the union's claim that the company was engaged in unfair labor practices.

### **Week-old construction transport strike idles concrete work at construction sites**

The pouring of concrete at construction sites around the Seattle area began coming to a halt at the end of last week as a strike by about 100 heavy equipment drivers, computer operators and batch-plant workers who transport concrete, rock and gravel began to have an effect. Members of Operating Engineers Local 302 overwhelmingly voted to strike July 31 over wages and

the retention of contract language that permits them to honor picket lines for other workers.

Four companies are involved in the negotiations: Glacier Northwest, Salmon Bay Sand & Gravel Company, Cadman Inc., and Stoneway Concrete. The construction boom in Seattle continues to rake in high profits for companies while wages for Local 302 members have not kept up with inflation.

### **New Jersey Housing Authority workers protest firings**

The Communications Workers of America Local 1040 has filed a grievance against the Trenton Housing Authority in New Jersey for its firing of 23 maintenance workers. The cutbacks have further undermined conditions in the city's projects, where remaining workers are now being forced to work overtime as the firings leave a mere one maintenance worker for each of the 91 housing units.

The CWA charges that the firings were targeted towards workers who were close to receiving their 25-year retirements which provide for health benefits. Workers are indignant over the alleged \$160,000 annual salary pulled down by the Housing Authority's director, Dallas Parks.

The Trenton Housing Authority is under the control of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the last five years it has lost \$3.2 million in federal funding, which accounts for 60 percent of its budget.



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