

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 August 2006

## Latin America

### No end in sight for Escondida strike in Chile

Negotiations remain at a standstill in the week-long strike at the Escondida mine in northern Chile, the world's largest open-pit copper mine. The company offer of a 3 percent wage increase and a bonus of US\$16,000 per worker is unacceptable to the strikers; they are demanding a 13 percent hike and a US\$30,000 bonus.

Miners point out that record copper prices of about US\$3.60 per pound, up from US\$0.80 per pound three years ago, have resulted in windfall profits for the mine owners of US\$2.8 billion in the first six months of this year, triple what the company earned last year. Escondida is owned by the British-Australian consortium of BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto.

The strike by 2052 miners has had an impact on the world price of copper; Escondida produces about 8 percent of the world's annual supply of the metal. Management is attempting to maintain production with 800 nonunion workers.

### Guatemalan government militarizes public health doctors strike

Public health doctors in Guatemala walked off the job August 10. This is the second doctors' strike this year demanding budget increases for better working conditions, as well as medicine and medical equipment for public hospitals and clinics. On August 13 the government announced that the armed forces would take over the hospitals. Military doctors would try to attend to patients in some of the hospitals.

Over the weekend 7,000 residents employed by the public health system voted to extend the strike to all hospitals and clinics after the government began proceedings to fire 19 strike leaders.

In July, following a 48-day strike, the Guatemalan government agreed to provide emergency funds to resolve the chronic shortage of antibiotics and other medications in the public health system. However, little

progress has been made, so strikers resumed their strike last week.

### Steel workers strike in Mexican port

On August 7 steel workers employed by Mittal Steel in Lazaro Cardenas, Mexico, marched in solidarity with their striking comrades at the nearby Sicartsa steel mill.

The strike by 1,500 workers at the Sicartsa mill is in its fifth month and shows no sign of resolution. The strike began April 3 in the wake of the mine disaster at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila in which 65 miners were buried alive and killed.

At that time the government of President Vicente Fox removed the leader of the Mine and Metal Workers Union, and installed his rival, Elias Morales, in the union bureaucracy, a decision rejected by the Sicartsa and Mittal Steel workers. Morales is widely seen as a government stooge.

Sicartsa, owned by the Villacero Group and Mittal Steel, is the fourth largest steel mill in Mexico. Strikers assert that Villacero has taken a hard line because it is seeking to use the strike to replace the Mine and Metal Workers Union with a company union.

### Striking miner shot at the Shougang Iron mine in Peru

Six hundred nonunion contract workers at the Shougang iron mine in Peru's Marcona Desert battled police last Thursday. One worker was shot in the leg and nine other workers and their wives were injured in the confrontation. Company officials claim that the conflict began when strikers attempted to prevent a scab truck from entering the mine.

The police then attacked the 300 pickets with teargas and batons. Shots were also fired, injuring the miner. Striking miners have blocked the mine since last Monday, a measure that they deem necessary in light of management's announcement that it intended to keep the mine open. Permanent employees at the mine are in solidarity with the strikers. The number of contract workers currently exceeds that of permanent miners at

the facility.

The contract workers walked off their jobs August 7, one day ahead of schedule, after three of their comrades were fired. The strikers are demanding a wage increase of 3.10 soles per day, about US\$1.00. The strikers are also demanding improved benefits.

## **United States**

### **Tennessee Boeing workers strike**

Workers at Boeing's Oak Ridge, Tennessee, plant rejected the company's job security and benefit provisions and walked out on strike August 7. Members of the International Association of Machinists Local 2709 voted down a three-year contract by an overwhelming 240-30 tally.

According to the company, the defeated proposal "provides significant increases in pay and retirement." But what has stiffened opposition to the contract is the company's incorporation of language that will allow vendors to perform inventory, dispatching and logistics functions at the Oak Ridge plant.

Similar language in Boeing contracts in Seattle and California has had a significant impact on the jobs of Boeing workers there. Workers are also indignant that they are not receiving incentive bonuses, severance and fully paid health insurance on a comparable basis to salaried workers.

### **New York City cuts nurses from small schools**

New York City is preparing to implement a plan to cut nurses from elementary and middle schools with lower enrollment. The city's department of education and health has targeted 45 schools that have special-needs children. The cuts will affect 18 schools in Staten Island, 13 in Queens, 11 in Brooklyn and 3 in the Bronx. None will be affected in Manhattan.

The door to the cuts was opened by concessions contract language agreed to by the United Federation of Teachers and AFSCME District Council 37. The new contract, effective July 31, no longer contained provisions that compelled school districts to put a second nurse in any school that had a special needs student.

### **Indiana machinists strike parts plant**

Members of the International Association of Machinists Local 1270 manned picket lines at Rockwell Automation August 7 after voting down a contract that would have required workers to pay more for health insurance. Workers voted against the

agreement by a 90-33 margin and approved a strike by a separate 89-30 vote.

Rockwell's offer of a 3 percent annual raise could not overcome opposition to their demand for workers to shoulder an additional 15 percent more per year in insurance costs over the course of a five-year agreement.

The Rockwell plant, located in Columbus, Indiana, employs 195 people and produces parts for Dodge.

## **Canada**

### **Toronto area transit workers ready to strike**

Three hundred employees of the Durham Region transit system east of Toronto will strike in September or October if no agreement is reached by that time. Durham Transit was formed January 1, 2006, with the amalgamation of transit systems of four nearby municipalities—Ajax, Pickering, Whitby and Oshawa. At that point transit workers chose the Canadian Auto Workers to represent them. Negotiations for a first contract broke off July 14 after management mailed an offer directly to workers trying to sidestep the union.

The previous bargaining units had dissimilar benefits and the union is trying to get a new contract to reflect the best of each of the former contracts. Main issues in the dispute revolve around concessions demanded by the region, including the elimination of a cost-of-living allowance, free legal advice, retiree benefits, vacation and bereavement entitlements.



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