

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 August 2006

Latin America

VW workers strike in Puebla, Mexico

Some 9,700 hundred workers at the Volkswagen assembly plant in Puebla, 70 miles east of Mexico City, walked off their jobs last Friday. The strike began after VW rejected union demands for an 8.5 percent wage hike, more than twice management's offer of 4 percent.

The Puebla plant operates around-the-clock five days a week and produces 300,000 cars a year. Currently, two models are produced, mainly for the US market. VW plans to build a third model next year and increase production to 350,000 cars.

Chilean copper strike enters third week

Officials of the Michelle Bachelett administration are intervening in negotiations between 2,052 striking copper miners and the British-Australian Escondida mine in Chile's Antofagasta Desert.

The main issues in the strike are wages, productivity bonuses and the length of the contract. The strikers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase plus a US\$30,000 bonus in a two-year contract. The company is offering a 4 percent wage increase and a US\$17,000 productivity bonus in a four-year contract.

Up until last week, management had been able to maintain partial production by employing non-union part-time workers. Last Thursday, however, a mass rally at the mine entrance effectively halted operations, despite police intervention.

Union leaders are under pressure to settle, in part because Chilean labor laws mandate that once a strike goes beyond 14 days, each worker is free to negotiate an individual contract with the company. The strike began on August 7.

Railroad strike in Chile

Five hundred workers belonging to five rail unions went on strike last Friday against the state-owned EFE rail line. On average, the line carries 25,000 passengers south from Santiago each day. The workers are demanding a wage increase of 2 percent per year. Management is offering 1 percent.

Ten other unions, representing 1,000 workers, already settled with EFE. Management says it will not grant strikers a wage and benefit package that exceeds what it has already given other workers. A spokesperson for the strikers said that management's wage offer is well below what the other union workers received.

Panamanian teachers strike

Panamanian public school teachers stopped work on August 14. The Teachers Action Front (FAM), which represents the strikers, is demanding a US\$190 raise, but the government will not budge from its offer of US\$90 a month. Any raise would be implemented in stages between 2007 and 2009. The strike affects 85 percent of the country's public schools.

Each side appears to be firm in its demand. FAM leaders point out that despite a US\$50 raise in 1998, teachers' real wages have dropped considerably.

On Thursday, 8,000 teachers marched in Panama City. They carried a petition to the Presidential Palace listing their demands and insisting that negotiations take place. President Martin Torrijos has rejected going back to the bargaining table. Instead, he urged teachers to accept the government's offer on the grounds that the government could meet the teachers' demands only by cutting social programs for 78,000 families in extreme poverty. He suggested that FAM leaders had a hidden political agenda.

Other Panamanian teachers, represented by the Teachers Unity Coordinating Committee (CUM), accepted the government offer on August 4.

Also on strike in Panama are 9,000 employees of the Social Insurance Agency, who initiated a 72-hour work stoppage on August 21.

United States

Indiana musical instrument workers continue four-month strike

Workers at the Conn-Selmer musical instrument plant in Elkhart, Indiana, rejected a new tentative agreement August 14 aimed at bringing their four-and-a-half-month strike to an end. Members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 364 voted by a 153-52 margin to reject an

agreement that would have implemented mandatory overtime of 20 hours each month, higher health insurance deductibles, and a reduction in pay averaging US\$4.25 an hour combined with a cap in wages.

While many workers indicated they were willing to work overtime to manufacture trumpets and trombones for Conn-Selmer, the overwhelming majority have bridled at the company's attempt to make it mandatory. In earlier contract votes, workers opposed the measure in April by 185-37 and again in June by 201-4.

Dan Messina, CEO of Conn-Selmer's parent company, Steinway Musical, told strikers, "You're playing Russian roulette with your job."

When the strike began in April, Messina warned that failure to accept concessions would lead him to consider moving operations to China, where he claimed the company would immediately see savings of US\$7 million each year.

Currently, the company is maintaining plant operations with 40 strikebreakers. About two months ago, a picket line confrontation exploded between workers and strikebreakers. Prosecutors have been contemplating criminal charges against union members.

Iowa nurses strike again

Nurses at Finley Hospital in Dubuque, Iowa, struck for three days beginning August 16. It was the second walkout in two months. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 199, which represents Finley's 300 nurses, called the strike.

The walkout came as hospital management further lowered its wage proposal from 3 percent to 2 percent, charging that the earlier strike by nurses in July had imposed greater financial hardship on the hospital.

Hospital management hired strikebreakers from US Nursing Corp. through August 20. Additional security personnel have also been added. No new contract negotiations are scheduled.

New talks in Illinois correctional center strike

New talks will take place August 22 in the two-and-a-half-month strike by counselors at the Sheridan Correctional Center in Sheridan, Illinois. The talks will be the first since May between Gateway Foundation and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents the center's 53 counselors, who are attempting to win their first contract.

Gateway has resisted attempts by counselors, who make 45 percent less than other state-employed counselors, to win increases in wages and benefits. Gateway Foundation was contracted by the state of Illinois to provide services

for the Sheridan Correctional Center. The company's CEO, Michael Darcy, said in a statement that he was "optimistic that the union will come to the table in the genuine spirit of compromise."

AFSCME has isolated the strike and attempted to pressure Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich to cancel Gateway's contract if it fails to bargain.

Canada

British Columbia nurses start work-to-rule campaign

Two hundred twenty nurses and health care staff working at 10 provincial jails in British Columbia launched a work-to-rule campaign on August 16. The workers, represented by the B.C. Nurses Union, are refusing to answer phones, organize charts, restock supply rooms or maintain files.

The main issues in the nurses' dispute with their employer, Joye Morris Health Services Inc., are wages and benefits. According to a union representative, there is a wide disparity in wages between the membership and nurses at federal penitentiaries, who are paid C\$4 an hour more and have full benefits. The nurses' last contract expired in March.

Vancouver airport security staff vote to strike

On August 15, security workers at Vancouver International Airport voted to strike by a margin of 98 percent. The 250 workers became members of International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW) Local Lodge 16 last March and are fighting for their first contract. They are employed by Securigard Services Inc. and provide security services around the perimeter of the airport, which includes checking suspicious packaged items and validating the identity of airport personnel to prevent any non-employee intrusions.

The workers were expected to issue a 72-hour strike notice. Issues in the dispute are scheduling, working conditions, shift preferences and favoritism—the same issues that prompted the workers to unionize.



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