

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 September 2006

Sao Paulo Volkswagen workers strike against layoffs

Workers at Sao Paulo's massive Anchieta auto plant in Sao Bernardo went on strike August 29 to protest the sacking of 1,800 employees by VW management in Brazil, part of the company's worldwide restructuring plan. Workers are showing up for their shifts but not lifting their tools, a tactic union leaders call "strike by occupation." VW management has indicated its willingness to shut the plant down if the workers resist "restructuring."

At its height Anchieta employed 20,000 workers; currently it employs 12,000. VW officials claim that the plant is unprofitable at that level of employment, and proposed to drastically reduce the total labor force (21,000 workers in five plants) by 6,000 workers and cut production for export. The drop in export profits is being blamed on a strong Brazilian real relative to the Argentine peso. Argentina is Brazil's principal trading partner.

In addition to vehicles, Sao Bernardo produces parts for other Brazilian VW plants. The job action is affecting production at those other plants. Management is considering imposing a vacation period on its other workers if the strike continues.

Chilean copper miners go back to work

Copper miners at the La Escondida mine in northern Chile returned last week after the company, BHP-Billiton, slightly sweetened its wage offer. The miners had demanded a 13 percent wage hike and a US\$30,000 production bonus in a three-year contract. The workers settled for a 5 percent increase and a US\$16,000 production bonus in a 40-month contract. The 2,052 miners had been on strike for 25 days.

Looming in December is a strike by the 10,000 miners at Chile's government-owned copper corporation, CODELCO, which produces 36 percent of the world's copper. Chilean minister for mining, Karen Ponjachik, declared last week that the company considers its costs (US\$1.08 per pound of copper) excessive, intimating that CODELCO miners should not expect that management will match the terms of the La Escondida settlement.

Striking teachers rally in Panama

On August 30, thousands of teachers, on strike over wages, marched in Panama City to protest the government's refusal to address their demands. They rallied at the offices of President Martín Torrijos, who has rejected the teachers' calls for an increase above US\$90 in their monthly salary, denouncing them for being intransigent. This despite the fact that teachers lowered their demand from US\$190 to US\$120.

Torrijos has threatened to replace all the strikers this week with university students despite pleas by parents' associations and the legislature for a negotiated settlement. The government is also docking striking teachers a day's wages for each day on strike, a move that is causing resentment among other government workers and could spread the strike.

The starting monthly salary for a teacher in Panama is US\$401.

Hospital workers strike California medical complex

About 450 hospital workers at John Muir Medical Center in Concord, California walked off the job August 28 on a two-day strike to protest management's refusal to return to the bargaining table. The strikers, comprised of licensed vocational nurses, certified nursing assistants, respiratory therapists, dietary aides, and other healthcare workers, have been without a contract since October 2005.

The Service Employees International Union has essentially resolved wage and retirement benefit issues with the hospital. However, workers are opposed to increased healthcare costs, including higher deductibles, out-of-pocket payments and drug costs. The plan would also limit workers to obtaining medical care within the John Muir medical system if the service is provided.

Workers are also calling for a ban on the subcontracting of jobs to the lowest bidder and guidelines to prevent unnecessary layoffs.

Hospital management hired temporary workers to fill in for strikers. Workers had staged a similar two-day strike on February 23-24 of this year.

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Union drops failed unfair labor practices charges against New York company

The United Steelworkers Local 4783 dropped all unfair labor practices charges last week against a New York cutlery maker two weeks after the National Labor Relations Board rejected the union's bad-faith bargaining complaints.

The 78 workers at Camillus Cutlery near Syracuse went on strike on May 17 over company efforts to cut wages, vacations and holidays. Management also would not guarantee a 40-hour week.

No new talks have been set between the two sides. The contract between the union and Camillus Cutlery expired March 31.

B.C. health workers reject union's settlement

The British Columbia Nurses Union (BCNU) was compelled to announce that the contract they had accepted was rejected in a ratification vote by striking healthcare workers at provincial jails last week after the union called off a weeklong strike on August 25.

Despite the union's recommendation of the deal, BCNU President Debra McPherson declared unashamedly, "This vote indicates that healthcare workers in our provincial jails are not prepared to accept substandard contracts from private contractors." Objections raised to the deal include inadequate sick pay provisions and other protections.

The 220 striking workers are employed by Joye Morris Health Services Inc, which has been contracted by the provincial government to provide healthcare to inmates at ten sites across the province. They include registered nurses, registered psychiatric nurses, licensed practical nurses, social workers, pharmaceutical technicians and clerical staff. Their last contract expired March 31.



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