

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 November 2006

Latin America

Tensions rise in Mexican mine over sacking of 40 workers

The mining company Industrial Minera de México fired 40 workers at its coal processing plant attached to the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila state. Management acted in reprisal for a slowdown that miners carried out during the first week of October. The protest was in response to bad treatment that miners received during the operation to retrieve the bodies of 64 miners killed in a mine explosion on February 19.

The local miners union has advised the sacked workers that the firings are illegal and that therefore they should not accept the company's intimidation. However, a management spokesperson indicated that the sacking was the result of negotiations between the company, the national union and the Labor Ministry in Mexico City and that any further measures will be negotiated with the union in Mexico City.

Mexican labor law allows management to fire workers if they abandon their posts without authorization for more than four days. The company claims that the 40 workers were absent for five days during October's slowdown. The union claims that the workers were not absent; they merely refused to work as part of the job action.

Protest march by GM workers in Chile

Over 150 striking GM workers marched through Central Arica, in northern Chile, as part of a struggle for better wages. Dissatisfied by the latest company offer, the workers, members of the Union of General Motors Workers, walked off their jobs on Tuesday.

The workers are demanding an immediate 8 percent raise, together with a back-to-work bonus of 1 million pesos (US\$1,900). They are also demanding an end to a workrule reform that would affect current seniority and work assignments. The *Estrella de Arica*, a daily newspaper, quoted the union president, Patricio Valdechy, who declared, "They are lowering our wages

every day. A few weeks ago GM brought in 90 workers at a monthly wage of 170,000 pesos (US\$323), well below the norm of 220,000 pesos (US\$ 418)."

Air traffic controllers slow down in Brazil

Brazil's 2,706 air traffic controllers began a work-to-rule slowdown early last week to protest working conditions. Instead of simultaneously tracking 16 or 17 flights, they have limited themselves to 14, as recommended by international rules.

The air traffic controllers began the strike to protest charges that a September 29 crash of a passenger jet was the result of air traffic controller error. The Boeing 737 jet was hit in the air by a corporate jet and crashed; 154 people died.

The job action is severely hampering air travel and transport in Brazil. Last Friday, only 350 flights took off from Sao Paulo airport relative to the normal 620 flights. On Thursday the head of the Brazilian air force, Luis Carlos Bueno, angrily ordered 149 air traffic controller to show up for work at the Brazilia tower, the nation's busiest, threatening to arrest them for insubordination if they did not. In Brazil, the air force runs the air traffic control system.

The government authorized an emergency hiring of 60 new controllers beginning on December 31. In addition to improved working conditions, the air traffic controllers are also demanding that the system be removed from air force control and be placed under civilian management.

United States

Teamsters call off California trash strike

The Teamsters union ended an 11-day strike November 2 by 300 trash haulers who service some eight suburbs in Orange County, California. Teamsters Local 396 called off the strike despite having reached no agreement with Taormina Industries. Three days earlier, drivers and mechanics rejected an attempt by a federal mediator to implement a 30-day cooling-off period under conditions where the company had

refused to return to the bargaining table.

Workers who did not return to work by an October 28 deadline were considered to have lost their jobs, according to Taormina management. The company has offered a \$3.35-an-hour wage increase spread out over a five-year contract. But the bigger issue, which will eat into that raise, is the cost of healthcare being imposed on workers by the company.

Taormina has brought in workers from 16 states who work for their parent company, Republic Services, in an effort to break the strike. While the Teamsters union isolated the Taormina workers, it remains in talks with Ware Disposal, which services the neighboring areas of Santa Ana, Irvine, Newport Beach, Costa Mesa, Laguna Woods and Orange.

Connecticut mental health workers strike over wages and benefits

Mental health workers at the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut walked off the job October 30 after talks between the management and the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, failed to produce results.

The 135 counselors, technicians and therapeutic aides are opposed to the Institute's attempt to foist a merit-based raise of 14 percent over three years, which they believe would be paid to only a small percent of the workforce. Instead, workers want an across-the-board raises of 3 percent in the first year, and 3.5 percent in the subsequent two years of the contract. Workers are also opposed to management's call for a 65 percent increase in health insurance co-payments.

According to the union, a newly hired therapy aid at the Institute of Living is paid a mere \$13 an hour, while a comparable position at a state institution pays \$20 an hour. Management is also putting up strong resistance to a workers' demand to recognize Martin Luther King Day as a paid holiday.

West Virginia coal miner crushed to death

An unidentified coal miner was killed and another injured October 30 when a shuttle car they were preparing to work on moved and crushed the men against the mine's wall. The second miner suffered serious chest and shoulder injuries.

The accident occurred at Bluestone Coal's Double Bonus mine on Pinnacle Creek in southern West Virginia. The death raises the number of fatalities in the mines to 43 this year, compared to 22 last year—the

highest number since 1995 when 47 coal miners were killed.

The 1995 record could well be eclipsed as the federal mining statistics show that winter can be the most dangerous time of year to work in the coal mines. Cold and dry air make it more difficult to control methane gas and coal dust, which are a major cause of mine explosions.

Canada

Toronto area transit strike ends

The 26-day strike by transit workers in Durham Region north of Toronto ended on October 31 when workers voted to accept a three-year deal recommended by their union.

The contract gives wage increases of 3 percent a year to the workers, who are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), and gives modest reductions in the number of part-time workers allowed.

The deal marks the first contract for transit in the region since it was amalgamated with Toronto and brings the contracts of three separate unions under the control of the CAW. The 300 workers affected include clerks, maintenance and services workers.

Strike looms at Nova Scotia university

Two hundred fifty-six professors represented by Saint Mary's University Faculty Union have given their union a strike mandate if no deal is reached with the school in the next few weeks.

The main issues in the dispute include salaries, benefits and class sizes. The union is seeking raises of 4 percent a year and the administration in offering only 1.75 percent. Mediated talks are scheduled to begin on November 14 and no strike action would be taken until the new year, according to a union spokesperson.



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