

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 November 2006

Latin America

Peruvian miners protest anti-labor law

Miners in Peru have threatened the government of Alan Garcia with a strike. Delegates of the miners' unions plan to meet November 22 to set the date of the strike.

Luis Castillo, president of the National Federation of Steelworkers and Miners, indicated that the miners are demanding Congress withdraw draft legislation that would tie pay to workers' productivity. The workers are also demanding that private administrators for their pensions be removed and that companies stop hiring part-time workers at low wages and with no social benefits.

Mining towns are also demanding more investment by mine management to finance social programs in the regions surrounding the mines.

Paraguayan nurses strike

Nurses employed by the Clinicas Hospital are to go on strike this week. A meeting of nurses took the decision to strike to protest parliamentary inaction on a nursing law. The nurses are also demanding 28 billion guaranies (US\$5.2 million) to equalize nurses' wages across Paraguay between temporary and permanent nurses.

Aida Robles, president of the Clinicas Hospital Nurses Association, indicated that, currently, permanent nurses average 2 million guaranies per month, twice the wage of temporary nurses. She denounced as a "mockery" that Paraguayan members of Congress recently gave themselves a raise to 24 million guaranies per month instead of acting on the draft law. The Paraguayan Congress also saw fit to raise the military budget, "postponing the needs of the society's most vulnerable layers," said Robles. By not acting on the draft nursing legislation, the government is also leaving in place a retirement plan nurses consider unacceptable, particularly the requirement that nurses work 45 years before being able to retire.

The draft law was first presented to Congress in 2000.

Mine cooperatives battle Morales government over Bolivian tin mine

A month after government-employed miners confronted members of mine cooperatives over control of Huanuni, Bolivia's largest tin mine, the cooperativists refused to lift barricades that are preventing traffic from moving along one

of the country's main roads and battled police sent to evict them. The highway connects the southern city of Oruro with Cochabamba in central Bolivia.

Armed with rocks and sticks of dynamite, the miners refused to end the blockade. Eight police were injured and 43 miners arrested.

The workers' cooperatives that obtain licenses to exploit mineral deposits claim that the government plans to hire them as employees of the state-owned Bolivian Mining Company, COMIBOL. The plan, designed to reverse the domination of mine cooperatives in some regions, was accepted by some of the cooperatives and rejected by others; those claim that their members can make a higher income by obtaining state concessions and exploiting mines as independent contractors. The plan, proposed by the Evo Morales administration, would reserve the exploitation of the Huanuni deposits to COMIBOL and hire 5,000 cooperativists to operate a mine there. Huanuni is the largest tin deposit in Bolivia with reserves of 948 million tons of tin.

On October 5, COMIBOL miners battled the cooperativists with sticks of dynamite. Sixteen miners were killed and 100 were injured. The National Federation of Mining Cooperatives (FEDCOMIN) blamed the Morales government for the incident and is demanding compensation for the victims. FEDCOMIN has 65,000 members and was one of Morales's principal backers.

Mine cooperatives were created in Bolivia in the wake of the savage repression of miners in the 1980s under President Paz Estenssoro. In 1986, Estenssoro defeated a miners' strike led by the Federation of Bolivian Miners (FSTMB) and took the opportunity to introduce "free market" reforms that led to the layoffs of 23,000 union miners and the abandonment of unproductive and spent mines. A layer of the unemployed miners took over some of the abandoned mines and formed cooperatives to exploit them. Over time, FEDCOMIN's power and influence grew, as successive governments used it against the FSTMB.

United States

Alcoa workers strike in Cleveland

Some 830 workers struck Alcoa Inc.'s Cleveland Works November 7 after the United Auto Workers (UAW) rejected

the company's most recent offer. According to UAW Local 1050, higher healthcare costs for workers and retirees, along with mandatory overtime, were the principal issues that led to the work stoppage. An Alcoa spokesman indicated the company "will try to operate as much of the facility as we can" during the course of the strike.

Alcoa claims it offered the Cleveland Works employees the same terms as it settled for in the agreement reached last June with the United Steelworkers union. That pact provided a 9 percent wage increase through 2009 and also compelled workers to pay \$20 each week for healthcare premiums—the first time employees have ever had to make these payments.

Teamsters union ends Texas transportation strike

The Teamsters union ended a five-day strike by drivers, mechanics and other workers against the Fort Worth Transportation Authority. The back-to-work decision came despite the fact workers voted down the final agreement by 37 to 21.

However, the 37 votes did not constitute a two-thirds majority of the 155 union members, some of whom crossed picket lines; therefore, the contract was considered ratified. Some workers question the accuracy of the vote count and plan to file a complaint with the labor board.

The contract between Teamsters Local 997 expired September 30, and workers rejected two earlier contract proposals from McDonald Transit Associates before going out on strike over sick leave and termination policies. The final three-year contract contained the same 3 percent annual raises and a two-year freeze on health insurance costs as earlier contracts. However, in the final agreement, workers lost a \$500 signing bonus and 38 workers were replaced with no guarantee that they will be recalled.

Arizona workers strike defense contractor

Workers at Raytheon Missile Systems operations in Tucson, Arizona, walked off the job November 6 after voting 1,018 to 111 to strike the military contractor. The company made a contract offer of 3 percent per year over the course of a three-year agreement while the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 933 insisted on 4.5 percent.

But workers primarily objected to company demands to jack up the cost of healthcare premiums. One worker told the *Tucson Citizen*, "My prime concern was the pass-through language. Any time after the contract is signed they can say they will raise the deductible or take more out of my check. To me, they might as well throw the union out."

Workers objected to media reports that lumped their pay with that of salaried workers, reporting an average annual salary of \$78,000. Wages of Raytheon strikers run between \$10 and \$20 an hour.

Strike by West Chicago public workers

Public workers for West Chicago walked out on strike November 7 to protest a lack of progress on negotiations for members of the Operating Engineers Local 150. For two years, the two sides have been attempting to reach an agreement on issues such as layoffs, recalls, subcontracting and wages.

The issues that provoked the walkout were the decision by the city to freeze pay and a change in policy concerning compensatory time. Among those workers affected by the strike are water department and waste treatment employees.

Canada

Ontario paramedics win first contract

More than 130 paramedics with the Ontario Air Ambulance service (ORNGE) are now represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) after the union signed a new deal last week. Workers covered under the deal include paramedics across the province in Moosonee, Timmins, Sioux Lookout, Kenora, Thunder Bay, London, Sudbury, Ottawa and Toronto.

According to the union, the new contract contains variable wage increases for members up to 6 percent as well as a return of seniority provisions that were lost when the ambulance service changed hands from public to private companies and then to nonprofit status.

New Brunswick school board regains right to strike

An appeals court in New Brunswick last week overturned a 2005 decision by the labor relations board that denied school custodians the right to strike by designating them as an essential service. A new contract was recently negotiated despite the fact that the strike issue was still in the appeals process.



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