Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 January 2007

Latin America

Mexican sugar workers union cancels strike, makes concessions to mill owners

One hour before an 11 pm January 20 strike deadline, negotiators representing 48,000 workers at 58 sugar mills announced a deal that surrenders workers' pension rights. Talks were conducted in secret under the mediation of Mexico's Labor Department.

A 1998 law gave sugar workers with more than 30 years of seniority the right to two pensions, a government pension from the Social Security Industry and a pension from their own employers. Employers argued that under that law, some workers could collect up to 160 percent of their working wages and demanded changes to the legislation. In 2002 the courts granted the sugar owners their request and increased the retirement age to 65 years, with 35 years of seniority, as well as virtually eliminating private pensions.

The new regulation left some 3,000 recently retired workers, who did not fulfill the new prerequisites, with no pension at all. On November 16, 2006, sugar workers walked off their jobs, demanding full pensions for those 3,000 former workers and a return to the 1998 rules. Strike action was suspended a week later and both parties agreed to continue negotiations until January 21, 2007.

In the interim management stood firm on the pension issue as the union whittled down its demands. The sugar companies are offering a three percent across the board wage increase, short of the seven percent that the union demanded. The union bureaucracy appears to have dropped this last demand.

On Friday workers rejected an offer by management that, in lieu of a pension, would have given 2,600 retired workers a lump sum payment of approximately 80 percent of their company severance (88 days of pay for each year of service). In the end the union bureaucracy settled for a slightly higher severance payment of 110 days of pay for each year of service for the retired workers, a four percent wage increase and a US$15,000,000 payment to the union. In addition to the surrender of pension rights the union also agreed to a speed-up scheme of productivity increases.

Uruguayan health workers demand back pay and vacation pay

Employees of the Medical Union's Assistance Center of Uruguay (CASMU) announced they intend to launch strike action and carry out the occupation of the CASMU "Ocho de Octubre" medical center. The Association of CASMU employees (AFCASMU) also sued the institution over two years of back vacation pay. It is asking that the courts freeze the company's funds.

AFCASMU leader Luz Vázquez indicated that in the absence of serious negotiations, a strike of indefinite duration is a certainty. Partial occupations of the medical center are scheduled for this Wednesday and Friday.

CASMU officials reported that the company, a medical insurer, faces a deficit due to "high salaries" and to the high cost of medicine and has been forced to cut costs. CASMU has 250,000 members and a staff of 7,000. A series of job actions was sparked by the insurer's decision on January 10 to lay off 190 employees. AFCASMU decided to target the "Ocho de Octubre" hospital in Montevideo as a focus for their protests and occupations this week because it considers that nursing services are being "dismantled" at the hospital. It will extend the occupations to four other clinics beginning January 29.

United States

Union offers return to work in 18-month Arkansas strike

United Steelworkers Local 1671 made an unconditional offer to return to work January 9, ending a year-and-a-half long strike at the National Wire Fabric plant in Star City, Arkansas. An official from the USW would only say that the strike, which began on

July 23, 2005, is now "in the legal process."

Some 56 workers launched the strike over the company's demands to impose concessions involving seniority rights, work assignments, vacation pay and to compel workers to pay for health care coverage for the first time. National Wire Fabric is owned by the Dutch conglomerate Gamma Holding. The Star City plant makes filtration systems used in the pulp and paper industry.

Massachusetts labor board bars teachers union from holding strike vote

The Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission issued a ruling January 18 that bars the Boston Teachers Union from submitting a proposal to union members next month to sanction a one-day strike. The ruling came after the Boston Public Schools submitted a petition to investigate the union for alleged strike proclamations. Massachusetts law bars all strikes by state workers.

Negotiators for Boston schools and teachers have been involved in contract negotiations since January of 2006. The current contract for teachers expired last September. Management for the schools has been seeking to boost class-size limits and increase teachers' portion of health care costs.

Two West Virginia coal miners die in tunnel collapse

Two coal miners were killed when a tunnel collapsed January 13 at a mine near Cucumber, West Virginia run by Brooks Run Mining. The unidentified miners were some 1.5 miles inside the mine. The remainder of the shift's 35-member crew was unharmed.

The Brooks Run mine, which was opened in 2004, was cited 65 times last year for safety violations resulting in $5,000 in proposed penalties. The mine will remain closed for an undetermined period while a federal investigation is conducted.

The two deaths mark the first fatalities in 2007 for West Virginia. Last year 47 coal miners in the US were killed in mine accidents, with 24 of those occurring in West Virginia.