

Workers Struggles: The Americas

6 February 2007

Latin America

Chile: Cerro Colorado mine workers to strike this Wednesday

With negotiations at an impasse, a strike appears imminent at Chile's Cerro Colorado copper mine. Last Friday, workers rejected a management offer; 98 percent of those present at a workers assembly voted to strike. "The offer is far from our demands," declared José Galaz, leader of the Cerro Colorado union. Following the rejection of an earlier offer, last Wednesday the company requested government mediation to prevent a strike.

Chilean labor law mandates a five-day period between a strike vote and the beginning of a strike. The period expires this Thursday.

Cerro Colorado, in northern Chile, produces 115,000 tons of copper annually and employs 556 union workers. Last December the miners presented a series of demands that included a 7.8 percent increase in base pay and improvements in medical benefits and education stipends in addition to a contract signing bonus of 3 million pesos (US\$5,400) and a bonus of 4 million pesos, due to the high global price of copper. Workers reported that management is offering a 2 percent wage increase.

University employees on strike in Mexico

Last Friday, 3,000 employees of the Veracruzana University in Veracruz, Mexico walked off their jobs to press their demand for a 20 percent increase in wages and benefits. The strike involved faculty at all of the university's 72 departments and research centers. University President Raúl Arias Lovillo accused the strikers of lunacy for not accepting the university's offer of 7.41 percent in wages and benefits—an offer which was revoked when the strike began. He called the strike "illegal."

Other strikes by university professors are taking place at the Chapingo Autonomous University (UAC) in the state of Mexico and the University of San Nicolás in

Michoacán state. At UAC, the professors are on a strike of indefinite duration after rejecting an 11th-hour management offer of 5.4 percent. In addition to a 20 percent salary increase, the 980 educators are demanding a US\$270 bonus and that the endowment for school employees housing be increased by US\$180,000. In Michoacán, where educators are demanding a 12 percent raise, the strike lasted 24 hours.

Garbage workers strike in Venezuela

Refuse collectors in Los Teques, a Caracas suburb, went on strike last Friday. The workers, who keep the streets free of refuse, declared that they have not been paid in two weeks. Walkouts and slowdowns in Los Teques and neighboring towns are creating a public health emergency.

United States

Lockout follows strike vote at Pennsylvania motorcycle plant

Workers began manning picket lines at Harley-Davidson's plant in York, Pennsylvania on February 2, one day after the company ordered its largest motorcycle manufacturing facility closed. The plant closure was a response by management to a 96 percent vote by members of International Association of Machinists Local 175 to reject the company's final offer, and a 98 percent margin to go on strike. There are about 3,200 union and nonunion workers work at the Pennsylvania plant.

Harley proposed a wage increase of 4 percent per year over the course of a three-year agreement. But half of the total increase is contingent upon the workers paying for the increased cost of healthcare. The contract also sought to impose a two-tier pension and wage scale.

The company recently reported profits for 2006 increased to \$1.04 billion from the previous year's \$959.6 million, but insisted on concessions, claiming it didn't want to be "in the same position that the Detroit

auto industry is in now.” One Harley worker complained to the *York Dispatch* that all the profits were going to CEOs. “Instead of them making \$40 million a year, why not take \$25 million a year and the other \$15 million will pay for our benefits?”

The company will negotiate new contracts with Harley workers in Kansas City, Missouri this summer and Milwaukee, Wisconsin next year.

California bus manufacturer’s strike ends

Some 500 workers at Gillig Corporation in Hayward, California voted by a 3-1 margin January 31 to return to work after a two-day strike shut down one of the leading US manufacturers of transit buses. Teamsters Local 853 President Rome Aloise said that the new three-year agreement had average annual increases of 4.6 percent and included other improvements that were not spelled out in the pact. “This strike was about dignity and respect, not about economics,” he claimed.

Prior to the strike, union officials had recommended ratification. But workers turned down the company’s last offer on January 27, citing the proposal’s deficiencies in wages and benefits. About 460 of the workers are Teamsters members, while the remaining 70 are members of Painters Local 1176.

Union aborts Pennsylvania Red Cross strike

American Red Cross workers in Johnstown, Pennsylvania returned to work January 31 without a contract. Red Cross officials claimed their proposed new contract offered more wages, vacation and holiday time and capped health insurance premiums at 20 percent. However, workers said the new offer contained the possibility of large deductibles that could undermine any gains.

The 160 workers, members of Communications Workers of America, represent a fraction of the 700 workers employed by the Red Cross’s Greater Alleghenies Blood Services Region, which services blood supplies for all of southwestern Pennsylvania and portions of Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia and West Virginia.

Canada

Saskatchewan public employees strike settled

Last week the union representing Saskatchewan’s 13,000 government employees reached a tentative contract settlement ending a 44-day strike by 1,340 members of its bargaining unit who work in

environment, justice, corrections, Saskatchewan Property Management, finance and highways. While the president of the Saskatchewan Government and General Workers’ Union (SGEU) refused to release the details of the three-year deal prior to the ratification vote later this month, the *Regina Leader-Post* previously reported it provides for a 13.5 percent increase in wages and benefits. Vote results are expected by mid-March.

The contract settlement could set the bar for negotiations with 1,200 public employees at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (SIASST), who have been in negotiations since June. The SIASST workers will be holding strike vote meetings this week at the institute’s four campuses in Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Prince Albert. SGEU’s professional services bargaining unit—which represents all the administrative support workers—is scheduled to take a strike vote as show of support for its bargaining committee. They have been at the bargaining table since September.



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