

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 February 2007

Latin America

Chile: occupation by striking employees

On February 11, striking employees of Pronto Copec (ARCO) took over the company office to protest management's lack of response to its wage and benefit demands. The Spanish-owned convenience-store/gasoline-station chain employs about 100 women at substandard wages. The occupied offices are located in a suburb of Santiago, Chile's capital city.

At 8 p.m., barely an hour following the occupation, the building was totally surrounded by government police, isolating the strikers from their supporters. A spokeswoman for the striking workers denounced the Santiago police for acting as "the private security force" for the company.

Technical school strike in northern Mexico

Union workers employed by the National College for Professional and Technical Education (CONALEP), in the northern Mexican state of Sinaloa, went on strike on February 9. CONALEP has 12 campuses in the state and employs 430 instructors. The strikers are demanding a 52 percent raise.

The strike takes place in response to an impasse in negotiations. During intense negotiations last week, the workers refused to lower their wage demands. University administrators insist that they are bound by budgetary constraints.

In the southwestern state of Michoacán, a strike is imminent at the Michoacán College of Scientific and Technologic Studies, the fifth strike in five years. The college has 59 locations throughout the state. Educators there are asking for a 20 percent wage hike. College authorities claim the raise would cost 40 million pesos at a time when the school has yet to receive the 2.8 million pesos for a six-year bonus. A similar state of affairs (no funds to meet educators' needs) exists for educators at the University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo, also in Michoacán State, who are scheduled to strike this week, and in institutions of higher learning

throughout Mexico.

Southern Copper workers threaten to strike

The union that represents the Southern Copper smelter in Perú last week indicated there will be a walkout on February 19 unless management negotiates a new contract with the workers. The union—the Unified Ilo Syndicate—recently absorbed other unions representing workers and clerical employees at the facility. Southern Copper is controlled by Grupo Mexico, a transnational company that, in addition to Southern Copper, owns mines and smelters in Perú, México and the United States.

Southern Copper's head of labor relations declared that the company would negotiate with the union that represents the smelter employees over specific issues and does not agree that a new contract is needed with the enlarged union. It plans to continue the old agreements until they expire.

United States

Strike at Ohio auto supplier ends

Workers at Pretty Products, Inc. in Coshocton, Ohio, ended their four-and-a-half month strike after ratifying a new three-year agreement February 7. The final vote by members of United Steelworkers Local 50L was 211-24 to accept a new agreement that the union claims will offer an improvement in wages, insurance and pension benefits.

Negotiations between the two sides began in the spring of 2006 and were followed by a 215-50 rejection of the first tentative agreement in July. In September, workers defeated another proposal by a narrower margin of 47 votes and launched a strike on September 25. Pretty Products responded in October by hiring replacement workers and made them permanent in November. The future status of the 210 replacement workers is not known. Pretty Products is a division of Lancaster Colony Corp. and makes floor mats and other products used in motor vehicles.

Las Vegas nurses' lockout ends

Some 800 nurses at two hospitals in Clark County, Nevada, voted unanimously February 7 to accept a new contract ending a lockout that started in December. The new three-year agreement with Valley Health System provides bottom-line wage increases of 5 percent in the first year, followed by 3 percent in the subsequent two years.

According to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents the locked-out nurses, the agreement brings salaries for Valley Health System licensed practical nurses into line with LPNs at other hospitals. Valley Health System is a subsidiary of Universal Health Services, Inc. of Pennsylvania, which ranks as the third-largest hospital management company in the United States.

Medical workers protest substandard contract offer in San Diego

Paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) held protests February 5 in front of the San Diego headquarters of their employer, American Medical Response (AMR), to demand higher pay and better healthcare benefits. Workers charge that they are the lowest-paid paramedics and EMTs in San Diego County and that, due to the high cost of living in the area, some 70 percent of their members qualify for Section 8 low-income housing.

The contract covering the 250 workers in San Diego County expired in November. Workers charge that AMR has offered them a lower-quality healthcare package at a higher cost. Workers are demanding a 21 to 29 percent wage increase over five years along with better 401(k) offers.

The medical workers are currently represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), but are considering seeking other representation. AMR is the largest private ambulance service in the United States.

Canada

Canadian National train workers strike

Two thousand eight hundred conductors and yard service workers employed by Canadian National Railway Co. Ltd. (CN) across Canada walked off the job on Saturday, February 11, affecting freight traffic across the country.

The workers are members of the United Transportation Union (UTU), which has not authorized the strike. CN has, as a result, sought to have the walkout declared illegal by the courts. The UTU

represents 125,000 transit workers in the US and Canada. The International union based in Cleveland has said the workers will not receive strike benefits.

The UTU is asking for a 3 percent yearly wage increase over the life of a three-year contract as well as a C\$1,000 signing bonus. CN has said that the strike only affects its workers in Canada and is using management personnel to continue operations wherever possible. Toronto's commuter rail system GO transit was set to join the strike last week but postponed their walkout when GO management agreed to re-examine existing contracts. The union has given assurances that passenger traffic will not be affected.

Quebec day care workers walk out

Workers at 25 day care centers in Montreal and nearby Laval staged a one-day strike on Monday to protest the hiring of educational assistants instead of more full-time staff. The 500 striking workers are represented by Syndicat des travailleuses(eurs) des centres de la petite enfance de Montréal et Laval (STCPEML). The proposed new part-time hires would earn C\$5 an hour less than full-time staff, an arrangement the union says threatens job security. In addition the union says its members are still waiting to receive a 2 percent wage increase promised almost a year ago.



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