

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 February 2007

Latin America

Mexican miners strike to mark anniversary of mine disaster

On February 19, thousands of Mexican miners went on strike for 24 hours to commemorate the first anniversary of the mine disaster that killed 65 coal miners at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila, Mexico. In the state of Hidalgo, 2,000 workers rallied in Pachuca. In Michoacán state, steelworkers shut down the Sicartsa Steel mill and placed a wreath at one of the mill's gates and observed a minute of silence in honor of the dead Coahuila miners. Strikes also took place in Zacatecas and other states.

The Pasta de Concho disaster was the worst in a wave of mine accidents in the course of 2006. Other mine accidents included equipment failure in the La Luz mine in the city of Progreso, Coahuila state, that killed one miner and injured four others.

Report exposes safety failures in Mexican mine disaster

A report released by the Mexican Labor Ministry confirms what coal miners have been saying all along: that safety measures were routinely ignored by management at the Pasta de Concho coal mine. Since the explosion one year ago, only two bodies have been recovered. Pasta Mexico is owned by the Mexican transnational company, Grupo México, which also owns mines in Peru and Texas.

The report indicates that there were between 90 and 120 safety violations at the mine. The report exposes as lies company claims issued February 8 that Pasta de Conchos met all safety requirements and that the mine was "modern and well equipped." The report also reveals the role that both the union and labor ministry inspectors played in the days prior to the explosion. Both signed off on an inspection report that covered up safety violations.

Manuel Fuentes, a lawyer who represents the family members of the victims, declared last week he has

documents proving that Labor Ministry complicity involved the office of the Labor Minister Francisco Javier Salazar and high management officials. It is alleged that Salazar participated in the cover-up because Grupo Mexico officials have close ties with former President Vicente Fox through their participation in "Vamos México" (Forward Mexico!), a foundation headed by Marta Sahuagún, Fox's spouse.

In an interview on Canadian Radio, Napoleón Gomez Urrutía, who was the president of the Mexican Miners and Metalworkers Union up until the mine disaster, denied the union had conspired with management to cover up safety problems. But he was unable to explain why the union allowed the mine to continue operating despite the safety concerns. Gomez was removed from the leadership of the union by the Fox administration right after the Pasta de Conchos disaster. He now resides in Canada.

Peruvian miners announce March strike

Copper miners and smelter workers at the Ilo smelter and the Cuajone copper mine in southern Peru gave government negotiators an ultimatum last Thursday to either begin negotiations for a new contract or face a walkout in March.

Arnaldo Oviedo, secretary of the Unified Ilo Smelter Workers, said Southern Copper refuses to negotiate with the union. Eight hundred sixty workers are employed by the smelter. Southern Copper, one of the largest copper producers in the world, is a subsidiary of Grupo Mexico. In this hemisphere it operates the Cuajone and Toquepala mines in Peru and the Cananea and Caridad mines in Mexico. The secretary of Unified Cuajone Mine Workers, representing 550 miners, issued the same warning. Last year Southern reported profits that exceeded US\$2 billion, a 50 percent increase over 2005.

United States

Strike at Pennsylvania motorcycle plant ends

Workers at Harley-Davidson's York, Pennsylvania

plant ended their three-week strike after voting by a 2,097 to 422 margin to accept a new contract. The International Association of Machinists touted the agreement, which provides for a 12 percent wage increase over the course of three years and continuation of full healthcare benefits.

However, workers will be required to pay higher deductibles and co-pays under the new terms. New hires will receive lower starting pay and will take much longer to arrive at top scale. New hires will receive a lower company match on optional contributions towards pensions in exchange for having contributions to the 401(k) plan doubled.

Harley-Davidson earned nearly \$1 billion in profits last year. Company CEO James Ziemer raked in a salary of \$623,908 and received bonuses totaling \$598,623.

California farm labor contractor fined for workers' deaths

The US Department of Labor fined a California farm labor contractor \$37,600 for violation of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act after an accident in the transportation of workers to a labor site resulted in the deaths of three workers and injuries to five others. G.V. Farm Labor Services was cited for not having a licensed driver, improper insurance, and transporting workers without proper authorization. The company also must pay back wages to 21 workers. It was late on paying wages, failed to provide wage statements and did not disclose employment conditions.

Government statistics reveal construction workers rank first in workplace fatalities

The most recent data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics shows one in five US workers killed on the job in 2005 was employed in the construction industry, making it the most dangerous industrial sector occupation. Construction workers were more than three times more likely to be killed on the job than other workers.

Out of a total of 5,702 workers killed in workplace accidents in 2005, 1,186 or 20.8 percent died as a result of construction workplace fatalities.

When the rate of workplace deaths is measured, the bureau found that construction workers suffered 11 deaths for every 100,000 workers during 2005. This compares to a national average of 4 deaths per 100,000 workers. When this measure is employed, three other

job categories fared worse: mining, agriculture and transportation.

When considering injuries and illnesses, construction workers are subject to 11 percent of the injuries on the job while constituting only 6 percent of the workforce.

Canada

Deal reached in rail strike

The leadership of the United Transportation Union (UTU) has asked striking rail workers at Canadian National Railway Co. (CN) to return to work even though a ratification vote on a tentative deal won't conclude for at least a month. This move is only the latest blow to the strikers who had come under attack from leaders of the UTU in the US who sought to have the strike declared illegal even before it had begun.

Last week CN found itself in the position of opposing the return to work by some strikers, insisting that they wanted to deal with the existing union leadership. In addition to the machinations of their own union, the striking workers are facing a back-to-work order introduced late last week by the federal Tory government. If passed this would be the first legislation of its kind since 1999.

The strike by 2,800 conductors and yard service workers employed by CN began on February 11. Details of the proposed contract have not yet been released, but the main issues in the dispute concern working conditions, wages and benefits.



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