

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 May 2007

## Latin America

### Chile: Iodine miners' hunger strike

Eight miners employed by the Cosayach Mining Company in Chile's northern Atacama Desert began a hunger strike on May 17. The purpose of the strike is to press for a resolution to their contract dispute with the company, which mines nitrates and produces iodine. The hunger strikers installed tents in the city of Iquique in Chile's far north to inform the public about the situation that they confront. In a press conference, Pedro Honores, president of the union representing the hunger strikers, said that miners' base salary of 120,000 pesos per month (approximately US\$200) represents only 40 percent of the average miner's pay. The other 60 percent of the worker's income is in the form of bonuses that are linked to productivity. The company employs 12,000 miners. The miners are demanding a base pay of 350,000 pesos. In addition to the wages, they are demanding that the company create a health and safety department to improve health conditions in its mines and iodine plant.

Honores described the company's position in the latest round of contract negotiations, a 4,000 peso annual bonus, as an insult and has appealed to Iquique's mayor to mediate with company management.

In addition to increases in base pay, the union is demanding better working conditions; Honores denounced the company's indifference to environmental degradation and miners' safety and health. Nitrate mining is associated with increasing cancer rates in miners.

### Mexican teachers' union threatens national strike over Social Security insurance

The National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), a dissident wing of the Mexican Education Workers Union (SNTE), called last week for a national strike against reforms to the public employees' healthcare system, the Institute for Social Security (ISSSTE). The reforms, based on an agreement between the government of Felipe Calderón and the official union bureaucracy, will place parts of the ISSSTE in the hands of private insurers.

Calderón vowed to carry out his reforms, which would make medical care more costly and less accessible to public employees. He indicated that the ISSSTE faces a growing deficit that now stands at 120 billion pesos a year (US\$11 billion).

This month, there have been two attempts to carry out a national protest strike against these reforms, on May 2 and May 17. Both were unsuccessful.

CNTE leaders denounced the collaboration of SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo with the ISSSTE reforms and called for her resignation. A date has not been set for the protest strike.

### Argentine airline workers strike to protest management contract violations

Employees of LAN Argentina airlines walked out for four days last week to protest contract violations by the airline's management. The strike included stewards, pilots and technicians. The violations cited by the strikers included management using workers outside their job

title and the denial of required rest time. The strike ended last Thursday in the wake of a new agreement between LAN management and the airline unions. LAN is mainly a domestic carrier, with some international flights.

### Rail transit workers paralyze Buenos Aires

A sudden one-day strike by Buenos Aires Metrovías subway workers paralyzed Buenos Aires, Argentina, on May 17. The wildcat strike was to protest a labor agreement arrived at behind workers' backs between Metrovías management and the unions. Instead of the 20 percent raise demanded by the workers, the agreement provides for 16.5 percent, according to union leaders.

Rank-and-file delegates at one point had a violent confrontation with union bureaucrats who signed the agreement.

Labor Minister Noemí Rial denounced the strikers for being "capricious" and met with Metro management to discuss unspecified "countermeasures." She rejected the possibility of negotiations with the rank-and-file delegates unless the latter ended the job action. The delegates ended the strike after 24 hours but indicated that other strikes and protests may follow this week. The Metrovías underground rail system transports commuters from Greater Buenos Aires. It consists of five underground and one above-ground lines that transport nearly 1 million passengers a day.

The strike took place two days after passengers protested and damaged a train terminal in southern Buenos Aires, because of repeated delays in train service. Many of the irate passengers declared that they feared being disciplined at work for being late.

### Patagonian teachers reject government proposal, vote to continue strike

Striking teachers in the Patagonian Province of Santa Cruz, in Argentina's far south, voted on Saturday to continue their strike. The strike has lasted more than five weeks.

Everything indicated that the government, anxious to put an end to the job action, would agree to most of the teachers' demands. However, the teachers rejected the government offer of a 500 peso base monthly wage (up from 161 pesos, or US\$55). The base wage is used to calculate teachers' retirement benefits. Eighty percent of the teachers voting rejected the government offer.

In addition to a higher base wage, teachers are demanding a minimum starting monthly wage of US\$700. They are also demanding to get paid for the days they were on strike. Following the release of the vote totals, provincial authorities categorized the teachers' position as "authoritarian and intolerant" and demanded that teachers return to work.

### University professors protest in Perú

Thousands of university professor marched last Tuesday through Lima and other major cities in Perú, marking the conclusion of a strike over wages.

The strikers, members of the Docent Federation of Public Universities (FDUE), are demanding the government of Alan García

carry out an agreement between the FDUE and the previous administration of Alejandro Toledo. That agreement raised university professors' salaries to those of judges.

#### **United States**

##### **Work stoppage at Illinois food service manufacturer**

Union and company officials at a Middleby Corporation's Elgin, Illinois, manufacturing facility are arguing whether a May 17 work stoppage was a lockout engineered by the company or a strike by the plant's 135 workers.

Gino Rodriguez, an official of Teamsters Local 714, told the *Chicago Daily Herald* the company was not telling the truth when they say workers went on strike. Instead, workers were locked out. "We have pictures of chains on the fence," he said.

Friction between the two sides center on Middleby's demand that workers accept a doubling of their portion of healthcare costs. The company has embarked on a cost-cutting campaign that came to light last fall when the company announced it would close two of its six US plants.

When Middleby acquired equipment maker Blodgett from Maytag Corp. in 2001, it closed two of Blodgett's four plants during its first year, resulting in a savings of \$15 million. Middleby's is a global leader in the manufacturing and distribution of equipment used in the food service industry.

##### **Walkout at Iowa slaughterhouse**

Between 200 and 300 workers at a Postville, Iowa, slaughterhouse walked off the job May 14 in response to repressive work conditions and an apparent scheme to lower workers' pay in conjunction with a Social Security number probe. Management at AgriProcessors, a kosher plant owned by an ultra-Orthodox family in Brooklyn, New York, is alleged to have sent out a letter to the largely immigrant workforce informing them that workers whose Social Security numbers couldn't be reconciled would be dropped to the bottom of the pay scale and start over at \$6.25 an hour.

A former AgriProcessors worker who emigrated from Mexico told the *Forward* that management would always "yell, yell, yell. They just treated us terribly. What resulted now is that we are standing up for our rights."

Back in April, 23 workers at the plant filed a class action lawsuit against the company, charging that management does not compensate workers for time spent suiting up at the beginning of shifts and after breaks, and time spent cleaning up at the end. AgriProcessors is also facing a lawsuit from an employee in Miami, Florida, who says the company failed to pay him for overtime. The company settled a similar suit the previous year.

##### **Settlements at Cleveland State University**

Faculty and staff have settled their respective contract disputes with Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio, after nearly a year of tense negotiations. The faculty, represented by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), accepted an across-the-board increase of 3 percent for each year of the three-year contract (an amount they previously rejected). The contract also provides for salary increases in the form of promotion increments, salary minimums, market adjustments and merit increases, bringing the total salary package to nearly 3.9 percent. Compromise was reached on the issue of post-retirement employment, in a reduced package. The new contract limits the number of non-tenured appointments to 10 percent of the total number of tenured and tenure-track faculty in the bargaining unit.

The professional staff, represented by the Service Employees

International Union (SEIU), negotiated a salary increase of 3.33 percent across the board for the first year of the new contract, and 3.16 percent for the remaining two years, with equity adjustments of 0.5 percent for movement through ranges on the salary scales. The union was unable to defeat administration's demand for a "Substance Abuse Testing Policy" (strongly opposed by employees) included in a Side Letter to the Contract, with the union retaining a "consultation" role.

##### **Tentative agreement in Connecticut school bus strike**

A tentative agreement was reached last weekend in the two-week-old strike by school bus drivers for the New Milford Public Schools system. Teamsters Local 677 declined to make details available pending a meeting with the 80 drivers who make up the one-year-old union.

Union members, who receive no benefits, are among the lowest-paid school bus drivers in their region. Currently, they make between \$11.40 and \$14.75 an hour. All-Star Transportation, the privately owned company that holds a contract with the school for transporting students, has offered a 3.5 percent wage increase, but many drivers are holding out for a better offer.

On May 16, about half of the striking workers crossed picket lines to resume driving for the school district. Among them are some 38 workers who signed a petition the previous week to decertify the Teamsters union.

#### **Canada**

##### **Greyhound on strike in western Canada**

Around 1,150 bus drivers and mechanics employed by Greyhound Canada in the four western provinces went on strike last Friday for improvements in wages, job security and working conditions. The strike by workers in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C., represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union, has halted passenger and package service throughout the region and beyond.

The strike was called after the union membership last week rejected a company offer of 2 percent in each year of a two-year contract. No negotiations are currently scheduled.

Greyhound workers in the US are also in contract negotiations, and their fifth contract extension will expire at the end of the month.

##### **Montreal transit workers set to strike**

A strike by bus and train maintenance workers and mechanics in the city of Montreal could be called any day after contract talks broke off last week. The two sides continued mediated talks over the weekend intended to avert a strike, and the city has vowed that there will be no service interruption.

The union is fighting for improvements in wages, but the city has said it can't afford any increases this year because of a wage freeze recently imposed by the municipal government. A strike would affect 2,142 workers.



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