

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 June 2007

Latin America

Mexican miners and metal workers to strike next week

The National Union of Miners and Metalworkers (SNTMMSRM) set a strike at several major locations beginning with the first work shift on June 10. If it takes place, the strike will shut down the sprawling Cananea and Mexicana de Cobre mines in Sonora State plus smelters and mines in San Luis Potosí, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Guerrero, and Zacatecas. All the facilities are owned by Grupo México, the nation's largest mining firm. Grupo México is also the world's largest silver producer, second-largest molybdenum producer, third-largest copper producer and eighth-largest producer of zinc.

SNTMMSRM leader Carlos Pavón indicated that the main reason for the job action is the indifference to safety at Grupo México's mines. The union is also demanding a reopening of the contract and a revision of the wage schedule.

The decision to strike was announced at a rally held across from the offices of the Labor and Welfare Secretariat. At that rally, miners also commemorated last year's death of 65 coal miners when the Pasta de Concho mine exploded, as well as the killing of two steel workers by police who attacked striking workers at the Lázaro Cárdenas mill. They also marked the 101st anniversary of the strike of the Cananea miners, which, together with the struggle of textile workers in Mexico City, was a historic antecedent to the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Chanting "No more murders," the miners called for the arrest and prosecution of "Copper King" Germán Larrea, chairman of the Grupo México mining conglomerate, for his role in the death of the Pasta de Concho and Lázaro Cárdenas workers.

Santiago Transit workers to strike this Wednesday

Fifteen hundred bus operators employed by Transantiago will strike this Wednesday. SuBus serves 1 million passengers a day. The decision to strike came in the wake of the company's rejection of 38 demands by the

workers. Instead, SuBus proposed extending the current contract, which was signed in 2001 with a wage increase of 20,000 pesos. Currently, operators earn 410,000 pesos per month (US\$780); they are demanding 485,000 pesos.

Colombian teachers return to work

A 10-day strike by 280,000 Colombian public school teachers ended last Friday. The teachers were joined by university students who are boycotting classes to protest a decision by the government of President Álvaro Uribe to transfer responsibility for education from the central government to the country's regional departments. The decision would effectively cut education by US\$25 billion over the next eight years. As a palliative, the regime had proposed to increase federal funds by US\$770 million for the same period.

The teachers returned to work with no commitment from the government, other than an agreement to open up negotiations. Last Wednesday, 100,000 people marched through the streets of Bogotá in support of the teachers' demands. The march was part of a series of protests that took place across Colombia.

Brazilian steel workers to strike this week

Employees of the National Steel Company (CSN) will begin a strike on June 4—the first such walkout since CSN was privatized. According to the results of a secret ballot taken at the CSN plant in Volta Redonda, in Rio de Janeiro State, 3,370 voted in favor of and 2,816 against the strike.

The workers rejected a 5 percent wage offer and a bonus of 2000 reales. The workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase and a 100 percent cost-of-living adjustment plus a bonus of 3,000 reales. Renato Soares Ramos, president of Metalworkers Union of Volta Redonda (SMVRR), said that the shutdown of the plant would be gradual and that a plant occupation is possible.

CSN was established in 1946 by the government as the anchor to Brazil's import-substitution policies. It was privatized in 1993 as a consequence of Brazil's debt crisis with the government under pressure from the International Monetary Fund. During the 1980s, CSN workers were at

the forefront of resistance to the military dictatorship. There were 12 historic strikes, beginning in 1984. A two-week strike and plant occupation in 1988 resulted in a clash between the workers and federal troops, with three workers killed and 50 injured. The last strike, in 1990, lasted 31 days.

United States

Space Shuttle workers vote to strike

The union representing 570 space shuttle program workers at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida voted to strike Saturday, less than a week before the planned launch of the shuttle Atlantis. The International Association of Machinist and Aerospace Workers, which represents the United Space Alliance employees, rejected the company's contract offer Saturday morning, *Florida Today* reported. United Space Alliance spokeswoman Tracy Yates said the union could strike as early as June 10, two days after NASA officials plan to launch Atlantis.

The IAM's negotiating team called the company's offer "substandard," said Lynn Beattie, former Local 2061 president. Both sides have agreed to a five-day cooling-off period. United Space Alliance remains hopeful that an agreement will be reached before a strike but stands by the company's negotiations, Yates said. "We believe our offer was fair, competitive and responsive to the issues that were raised during the negotiation," she said.

Union denies deal in Southern California supermarket talks

A union for Southern California grocery store clerks is denying a report that it reached a tentative contract deal with three supermarket chains to avert a possible summer strike. The United Food and Commercial Workers have been in talks for five months. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that an agreement in principle was reached on the crucial issue of health benefits for the 65,000 union members.

But a spokesman said today there's no agreement with the Albertsons, Ralphs and Vons supermarket chains. In fact, the president of the union local says the markets have proposed "an unacceptable scheme" that would bankrupt the workers' healthcare fund.

Starkist Tuna threatens jobs in American Samoa

The owner of StarKist Tuna's Samoa cannery in the US territory of American Samoa said it would review operating plans after the passage of the minimum wage increase in the territory. Del Monte Food spokesperson Mary Sestric says the initial increase of 50 cents per hour, combined with the further annual automatic increases, is

compelling the company to seek other alternatives to remain competitive in the global tuna marketplace. She said if the company could not find a successful resolution, which no doubt involved tax concessions and other subsidies, the company's current investment program to expand Samoan operations would be affected.

Organization exposes exploitation in Minnesota restaurant

Members of the Workers Interfaith Network (WIN) entered the Great Moon Buffet in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during lunch to hand out leaflets exposing the restaurant's exploitation of immigrant workers. Two months earlier, Ermelindo Villalobos-Ortiz came to WIN to describe the treatment he received from the management of the Great Moon Buffet.

Villalobos-Ortiz related how he was forced to work off the clock without pay, was denied breaks, and was paid in cash so the restaurant could avoid taxes. He was recruited in Texas and driven to Minnesota for the job. The \$450 cost of the trip was deducted from his paycheck. Martin Goff, state director for the union UNITE/HERE, which represents workers in the restaurant industry, told *Workday Minnesota* the practice is very widespread, with workers being asked to work for two weeks for free to obtain employment. "There's basically slavery going on."

Canada

Molson workers on strike

One hundred two workers at the Molson Coors Brewery in Edmonton, Alberta, went on strike May 30 after talks broke down between the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), representing the strikers, and company negotiators. The union has said that there is no basis for the huge concessions the company is demanding, which include wage and pension rollbacks for new hires to levels of the 1980s—this under conditions where the cost of living continues to soar in the oil-rich province.

The Edmonton brewery supplies bottled beer for Western Canada, but the company has said there will be no disruption to supply, which can be brought in from Vancouver and even Toronto if necessary. No new talks are currently scheduled.



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