

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 June 2007

Latin America

Transit Strike in Santiago, Chile

Seven hundred drivers of the Subus bus company in Santiago went on strike on Monday, June 11. Subus is one of 10 private companies that are part of Santiago's transit system. It connects northern with southern Santiago, and is used by 1 million passengers each day.

Early in the morning, strikers set up pickets outside the Subus bus barn to prevent company strikebreakers from operating the company's 622 vehicles. Police broke up the pickets with water cannons. Twenty-five drivers were arrested. In the wake of the street battle, non-striking bus drivers refused to cross the picket lines in solidarity with the pickets.

The strikers are demanding an increase of US\$115 in their monthly wage, currently set at US\$815. A union spokesperson indicated that Subus management's offer contains no wage increases until 2011. Subus authorities demanded that the Chilean government declare the strike illegal, as a result of the police battle Monday morning.

Strike by Mexican miners is imminent

Miners and metal workers belonging to the National Union of Miners and Metal Workers (SNTMMS) are set to strike against mines and smelters owned by Grupo México if the company fails to address their safety demands. Grupo México is a transnational firm that owns mines and smelters across Mexico, including the Cananea and La Caridad mines in northern Mexico and the Lázaro Cárdenas steel plant in Michoacan State. All three of these work sites have been scenes of militant class battles since February 2006, when the Pasta de Concho coal mine exploded, killing 65 miners.

Six-week strike by Brazilian Central Bank employees

Employees of the Central Bank will vote this Tuesday on a possible settlement to their wage demands. Union spokesman David Falcão declared that he expects bank authorities will make a proposal that is acceptable to the striking employees. He warned that, with each passing day, the strikers are becoming radicalized and called for a common sense offer. "Everything is in the government's hands," he said.

The Human Resources Secretary of the Planning Ministry, Duvanier Paiva Ferreira, convened a meeting with Central Bank and union negotiators in an attempt to reach a solution to the strike. The strikers are demanding wage parity between bank analysts and technicians and those of other public agencies. Union figures indicate that there is a US\$1,500 gap

between the monthly wages of the former and the latter, a difference of 43 percent.

United States

Contract ratification ends six-day garment strike

Workers at three garment manufacturers in eastern Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley voted to end their six-day strike and ratify a new three-year agreement. By a 313 to 95 margin, workers at A&H Sportswear Inc. in Pen Argyl, International Women's Apparel of Forks Township, and Universal Sportswear in Bangor accepted a new contract that requires first-time contributions by workers for their healthcare coverage.

Workers will now pay weekly premiums and 15 percent of outpatient bills. Besides healthcare concessions, the agreement provides minimal wage increases: a \$500 bonus during the contract's first year followed by 2 percent wage increases in both 2008 and 2009.

The six-day walkout by a total of 500 members of UNITE HERE was considered the largest strike in some 50 years. Lehigh Valley garment manufacturing developed after World War II when companies pulled out of New York. In 2006, the area had 1,120 sewing machine operators making \$10.32 an hour. Some of the recent striking sewing machine operators reported making a base wage of \$8.00 an hour.

Massachusetts labor board orders striking teachers back to work

The Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission ordered Quincy teachers to return to work June 9, just one day after union members walked out, closing 19 of the city's schools and idling 11,000 students. The Commission issued the order citing the state's law barring teachers' strikes. The president of the Quincy Education Association was slated to read the order to union members Monday.

The strike was sparked by Quincy Mayor William Phelan's contract offer that doubled healthcare insurance costs from 10 percent to 20 percent. The union's 900 teachers voted overwhelming against the offer, claiming that the mayor's 13 percent wage increase over four years would not mitigate the effects on teachers' living standards when healthcare costs were factored in.

Grievance sparks two-day strike at Ohio GE plant

Workers at a General Electric glass manufacturing plant in Niles, Ohio, began a two-day walkout June 7 over a vacation-related grievance. About 125 members of the United Electrical Workers Local 751 struck the facility that makes spotlights and

floodlights over an issue that stems from a July 2006 scheduled shutdown.

In implementing the shutdown, GE allowed one worker to be put on layoff status while other workers were compelled to use vacation time. The union charged that the layoff status should have been granted by seniority. GE has defended its handling of the layoff.

Revised contract offer ends machinist strike in Washington State

The 371 workers at Triumph Composite Systems Inc. in Spokane, Washington, voted to end their five-day strike last week after the company submitted a revised offer. Members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) struck the facility June 1 over wages and pay disparity between old and new hires.

It is not clear that the new agreement addressed these issues. The new agreement maintained health care costs at current levels, provided pension increases and a cumulative cost-of-living adjustment to be paid twice yearly. It also included an increased signing bonus and wage increases of 4 percent in the first year followed by 3 percent hikes in years two and three.

Triumph Composite Systems purchased the facility from Boeing in 2003. A local union official boasted to the *Spokane Spokesman Review* that resistance to the initial contract offer, which IAM coordinator Mark Blondin called a “good offer,” had been beaten down since workers took a 15 percent wage cut at the time of the ownership transfer. “The employees have bought into every lean concept since then,” he said.

Northwest flight attendant vote contested

The president of the previously ousted union for Northwest Airlines flight attendants has challenged the ratification vote by the 8,100 workers that passed by 104 votes. Guy Meek, who headed the Professional Flight Attendants Association, which was replaced after Northwest’s entry into bankruptcy by the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), claims some members were not allowed to vote or weren’t provided with information concerning the vote.

The AFA, an AFL-CIO affiliate, revealed 484 ballots were disqualified—242 for failing to pay union dues and another 224 for flight attendants who were not members of the union. Meek has asked the AFA to rerun the ratification vote.

Flight attendants had voted down two previous offers. The most recent vote ratified a concessionary contract that lowers the highest annual pay for flight attendants from \$44,190 to \$35,400. The ratification came just before Northwest exited bankruptcy. Had flight attendants not ratified the vote, the AFA would have lost access to a \$182 million claim in bankruptcy court that translated into a \$15,000 payout to flight attendants. About \$8,700 of that amount was scheduled to go into 401(k) accounts.

In all, unions at Northwest conceded \$1.4 billion in annual concessions that will extend through 2011. In contrast, the top 400 executives and other officials in management have come

out of bankruptcy with a 5% equity stake in the new company, estimated at \$297 million. Company CEO Douglas Steenland was awarded approximately \$20.8 million in stock, with an additional \$5.8 million in options. Four other top executives are also to be given bonuses valued between \$10 and \$14 million each.

American Axle to close Buffalo plant

American Axle and Manufacturing (AAM) is scheduled to cease production at its Buffalo, New York, plant at the end of 2007 and will permanently close the factory when the United Auto Workers (UAW) contract expires in March 2008, eliminating the jobs of 650 workers. The plant, which has operated since 1923, originally as a Chevy assembly plant, supplies drive trains and gears/axles for full- and light-size trucks and SUVs for GM and the Chrysler Group. Production will be transferred to new facilities in Changshu, China, and Olawa, Poland, where labor costs will be a fraction of those of the current US workers. The UAW has offered no means to fight the plant closing.

Canada

BC road workers strike

Nearly 400 highway workers across British Columbia are now involved in a rotating strike action or lockouts, and their numbers are set to keep growing in coming weeks. While the workers have different local employers, they are represented by the BC Government Employees’ Union (BCGEU), and over the last five years their numbers have been almost cut in half as a result of funding cuts by the provincial Liberal government.

In addition to falling numbers, road crews are overworked and underpaid, having accepted wage cuts of between 6 and 8 percent in recent years.

Ontario construction laborers on strike

Last week, more than 25,000 construction workers across the province went on strike after five employer groups that are involved in negotiations failed to reach an internal agreement on their demands. The union immediately announced that they would picket job sites for only one day. Workers walked off the job when talks collapsed without a wage offer even being advanced.



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