

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 June 2007

## Latin America

### Southern Copper workers go on strike in Peru

Two thousand copper workers, employed by the Southern Copper corporation, walked off their jobs June 22. Southern Copper is the third-biggest world copper producer. It operates the Toquelpa and Cuajone mines and the Ilo smelter, in southern Peru. In turn, Southern Copper is owned by Grupo Mexico, a transnational corporation with mines and plants in Mexico and the United States.

The workers are demanding a wage increase and better working conditions. Román More, general secretary of the miners' union at the Cuajone mine, indicated workers were not intimidated by a Labor Ministry declaration that the strike was illegal.

Both sides had negotiated for months with no agreement on wages. Copper workers are demanding a greater share of the profits from a global increase in the price of this commodity.

### Mexican miners continue strike threats over health and safety

Leaders of Mexico's National Miners Union (IMMSA) declared last week that, due to poor health and safety measures, more than 70 miners and foundry workers had died in the last 15 months and reiterated a threat of strike unless health and safety improvements are made.

The Miners and Metal Workers Union had called for a national strike against mines and smelters owned by Grupo Mexico, a transnational company that also owned Pasta de Concho. Strikes that were scheduled to take place in Grupo Mexico facilities in San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Sonora were postponed until next week. In addition to amnesty for Gomez Urritia, the issue of the strike is safety violations at the mines and smelters. Seventy-seven IMMSA members died on the job last year, including 65 at Pasta de Concho and 2 as a result of police repression in the Lázaro Cárdenas-Las Truchas steel mill in Michoacán state.

The IMMSA declared June 15 that the refusal of the government's Conciliation and Mediation Board to give the strike a go-ahead forced the union to postpone the action. IMMSA leaders warned that they would hold the government responsible for any more deaths in the mines.

There are signs that divisions within IMMSA forced the postponement. In the past year, the union struck repeatedly without government authorization.

On June 15, the majority of the coal miners in the City of La Rosita, Coahuila state, ignored a decision by the national IMMSA bureaucracy to walk out, citing a lack of confidence in the motives of the leadership. Many felt the job action was a factional maneuver by supporters of Urritia. Workers at other mines also indicated opposition to the strike, saying they were facing pressure from the union bureaucracy to support the action.

### Bahia, Brazil: Governor issues ultimatum to striking teachers

Bahia's Governor Jaques Wagner issued an ultimatum on June 21 to 3,000 striking teachers, threatening to refuse to pay their wages for

any of the days that they are on strike unless they return to work on Monday, June 25. The wage cuts will be suspended if the teachers return to work and present a proposal on how to restore 46 days lost due to the strike. The governor is confident that the courts, which have already declared the strike illegal, will validate his decision.

The governor's ultimatum is designed in part to split the teachers. Those who do return to work, or who have not gone along with the strike, would not have their wages cut—some may actually get a bonus. The courts ordered the teachers union (APLB) to end the strike May 29 and imposed a daily fine of R\$20,000 (US\$10,000) for each day that the strike continued.

Bahia is a state in northeastern Brazil. The teachers have been on strike since May 8. The governor's decision follows an edict by Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula that would also impose a similar cut in wages for all striking federal public employees.

Last week, Edenice Santana, director of the teachers union (APLB), called on students and their parents to mobilize in support of the striking teachers and denounced Governor Wagner. "He is abandoning the social base that elected him," said Santana. She warned that Wagner's intransigence could lead to the cancellation of classes for the year.

The strike began after APLB members rejected a wage offer presented to all public employees by the state legislature: a 4.5 percent increase for most and 17.28 percent for all employees who make less than R\$380 per month. The teachers are demanding 17.28 percent for everyone.

Teachers have also gone on strike in the adjacent northern state of Pernambuco. The 28,000 strikers in that state are demanding a 20 percent raise.

On the federal level, President Lula is campaigning in favor of a hard-line policy on public sector strikes that, in addition to discounting wages for days lost due to a strike, includes a policy of no negotiations until a strike is over. Lula's proposal is being discussed by the Brazilian legislature.

Throughout this month, there have been a series of job actions by government workers, including slowdowns and strikes in various government ministries, in 43 federal universities and the Central Bank. The Federal Employees Union, a CUT affiliate, estimates that 95,000 employees are, or have been, involved in job actions during this period.

## United States

### Workers strike car dealership in Washington state

Thirty-one mechanics and workers in the parts and lube departments at Columbia Ford, members of the Machinists and Teamsters union, went on strike June 18 in Longview, Washington, over healthcare issues. According to the Teamsters union, the car dealership's attempt to increase healthcare contributions by workers will nearly triple their monthly payment.

Contract talks began April 25. The Teamsters rejected the dealer's

last offer on May 30, one day before contract expiration. A spokesman for management said the dealership's service center will be closed "until we can get some replacements."

#### **Investigation demanded into state agency withholding information on cancer deaths**

The Steelworkers union is calling for an investigation into the withholding of data by the Minnesota Department of Health on deaths among taconite miners on the state's Iron Range. In 2003, the department released data that indicated 17 miners had died from exposure to commercial asbestos. However, the agency failed to release data on the deaths of another 35 miners to mesothelioma, a cancer related to asbestos exposure, for more than a year.

The Health Department has admitted to withholding data, but claims it did so because it wanted to release the data with a plan of action. "We had wanted to release the data about the deaths along with our research plan," said Commissioner Diane Mandernach, "so that we could assure the mining community we were doing everything possible to respond to the mesothelioma deaths we had identified."

United Steelworkers District 11 Director Bob Bratulich said, "We should be told the truth immediately if there is a problem with fibers in the rock of some of these operations,"

#### **Massachusetts teachers to vote on new contract after judicial strikebreaking**

Teachers in Quincy, Massachusetts, will vote on a new five-year contract this week after reaching a tentative agreement that leaves in place increases in healthcare costs while spreading them over a longer period. The doubling of healthcare costs from 10 percent to 20 percent for faculty was greatly facilitated by Superior Court Judge Thomas Connors, who declared the teachers' strike illegal June 11. Another superior court judge, Judith Fabricant, followed up when teachers failed to heed the order and imposed a \$150,000 fine on the Quincy Education Association.

Teachers' strikes are illegal under Massachusetts law. In addition to ordering teachers back to work, Connors also insisted the union place a message in bold type on its web site acknowledging the strike was illegal and calling on union members to rescind their strike vote, something the union refused to do. The following day, however, the teachers did comply with another of Connors's orders that required the union to post a message noting that the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission had issued an order for the teachers to return to the classrooms.

Teachers ended their strike June 13 after four days on the picket line but refused to consider either of two contract offers that covered two and three years, respectively. The new five-year agreement delays the increase in healthcare costs by waiting until the second year to implement a 5 percent increase and following up in the third year with another 5 percent increase.

#### **Labor Department official questions workers' union sympathies**

When 16 workers at the giant Smithfield Packing plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, sent a complaint to the Labor Department alleging drinking water was tainted by processes involving slaughtered animals, a department official used the occasion to question a worker about his union sympathies.

The May 23 complaint by 16 workers charged that drinking water was exposed to live pigs, pig blood and other pathogens. When a Labor Department investigator went to the plant to meet with Keith Ludlum, one of the workers involved in the complaint, he did not begin by inquiring into the issues surrounding the complaint. According to indyweek.com, Ludlum said the official began by asking

him, "I understand you are real close with the labor guys."

The United Food and Commercial Workers union, which is involved in a campaign to organize the plant, has filed a complaint to the National Labor Relations Board. The complaint also charges the investigator attempted to convince Ludlum of the "futility of the workers' complaint against Smithfield."

#### **At least one Mississippi construction worker dies in bridge accident**

Nine construction workers plunged into the Bay of St. Louis June 14 when a column on a bridge collapsed. Eight workers were taken to the hospital where one of them, 51-year-old Alger Pennamm, was pronounced dead. Another worker is missing.

The workers, employed by Granite Archer Western, were pouring concrete on a new \$267 million bridge that connects the Gulf cities of Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian when a column failed. The Coast Guard dispatched helicopters and a boat in an effort to find the missing worker.

#### **Construction union official guilty of receiving bribe**

A union shop steward pled guilty to receiving an \$8,000 bribe from a construction company for under-reporting carpenters' hours at a Brooklyn, New York, job site. David Veltri received the bribe in a cash payment from Tri-Built Construction, Inc. for submitting a false shop steward report on hours put in on a project at Kings County Hospital. The owners of Tri-Built were charged in a separate indictment back in 2006.

#### **Canada**

##### **Group home workers on strike in London**

Around 450 workers employed by Community Living London, who went on strike last week seeking improvements in wages and working conditions, have been joined by others in adjoining districts in recent days.

The strikers include support staff at group homes for the developmentally disabled in and around London in southern Ontario who are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). The union has said the strike could be a lengthy one unless the provincial government increases funding to improve wages.

The company has been using replacement workers since the strike began, but nearly half of the group homes affected have been closed as a result of the strike. The union has said it is merely seeking parity with others doing similar work and trying to catch up from years of low-wage contracts and government-imposed wage freezes that have made it difficult to keep staff.

##### **Sudbury bank workers walk out**

More than 100 workers at TD Canada Trust in the greater Sudbury area walked off the job last Monday in a bid for wage improvements and to protest stalled contract talks.

The company has reportedly asked workers not to speak publicly about their wages, but it is an open secret that bank workers receive notoriously low pay and are often forced to work overtime without pay. The workers are represented by the United Steelworkers of America, who say that public support for their strike is very strong.



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