

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2007

Bolivian football players to strike next week

Bolivian football players plan to strike on August 3 to protest management's restriction on free agency rights that govern how players may move from one team to another. Bolivia's soccer season consists of two tournaments. According to new rules mandated by the Professional Football League, players who belong to one team during the March-June competition must stay with the same team during the July-December competition. League officials claim that the rule change is necessary to ensure the stability of the teams.

The strike will delay the opening of the second tournament.

Partial settlement in Chilean copper miners' strike

Last Monday, 20,000 contract workers settled with the state-owned Chilean Copper Company (CODELCO), accepting a US\$873 productivity bonus and an increase in education and health benefits. Another 8,000 contract workers are continuing their strike, demanding a US\$2,100 bonus and an 8 percent wage increase. Negotiations are deadlocked.

It has now been more than 35 days since 28,000 contract miners struck CODELCO. The miners, who work for private subcontractors, are demanding wage and benefit parity with the 14,000 miners who work directly for the company.

Cristián Cuevas, leader of the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC), which did not accept the government offer, declared in an interview with a Chilean TV network (TVN) that the government is responsible for the conflict because it tolerated for many years the unequal treatment of contract and regular workers. He pointed out that CODELCO had agreed to parity between both sections of miners in 2006 and had done very little since.

A report last week in Miami's *Nuevo Herald* indicated that subcontractors are reporting economic losses as a result of the strike that may force some into bankruptcy. Some contractors report they will be unable to pay workers the first half of a bonus due under terms of the settlement. CODELCO management is also reporting

substantial losses.

Despite the partial settlement, the situation remains tense. On Thursday, a train carrying copper concentrate to the port city of Ventanas derailed. Management accused miners of causing the derailment. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet called on workers to act responsibly, saying that CODELCO belonged to all Chileans.

The strike has shut down two of CODELCO's five divisions. At the El Teniente mine, the world's largest underground copper mine, miners have refused to cross the strikers' picket lines, resulting in a daily loss of US\$9 million. It is estimated that sometime this week, total lost copper revenues for the copper company will exceed US\$100 million. CODELCO produces 11 percent of the world's copper. The strike has reduced world copper supplies by 3 percent.

Argentina: Sixth strike in three months for communications workers

Members of the Telephone Workers and Employees Federation (FOETRA) carried out a 72-hour strike on July 25 to protest a deadlock in negotiations with the privatized Telefónica de Argentina. The strikers marched on the company's offices in Buenos Aires on Wednesday and Thursday. They are demanding a 25 percent wage increase.

As a precondition for any wage increase, management is demanding that the workers sign a productivity pledge and allow the company greater flexibility in worker assignments.

For three hours last Thursday, 2,000 strikers occupied the offices of the Movistar cell phone provider, which is also owned by Telefónica de Argentina.

On July 18, communications workers employed by French-owned Telecom Argentina received a 16.5 percent increase.

Union official warns privatization of postal service under way

The top official of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) warned a US Senate subcommittee on July 25 that the United States Postal Service (USPS) "has begun

to travel resolutely down the road of privatization without authorization from Congress.” William Burrus, APWU president, warned that privatization “is just one aspect of a dangerous trend: the wholesale conversion of a vital public service to one performed privately for profit.”

Burrus told senators that the decade-old pressure by interest groups to “save” the USPS, which resulted in the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, had provided a smoke screen behind which forces were deciding policy without any public accountability. Burrus read from a July 7 *Washington Post* article that quoted a mailing industry spokesman saying, “In the not too distant future, the Postal Service could evolve into something which could be called the master contractor, where it maintains its government identity, but all the services would be performed by private contractors.”

One organization that brings together top postal officials and mailing industry moguls, the Mailers Technical Advisory Committee, refuses to allow outsiders to attend its meetings. When the APWU sent a representative to attend the meetings, the committee barred entry and declined to provide minutes of its deliberations. Burrus described the USPS as “a private investor’s dream: a tax-exempt, public monopoly, with revenues of \$80 billion per year.”

New talks in strike by California service and maintenance workers

Company and union officials sat down July 26 to resume negotiations in the month-and-a-half-long strike by workers at Valley Power in California’s Alameda County. The walkout was triggered when Valley Power bought out Stuart and Stevenson in 2005 and terminated an existing contract without notifying the union.

In an information bulletin, workers accuse the company of refusing to “contribute to union medical and pension plans” and blocking access to “retirement funds they have contributed to for decades.”

Valley Power provides field service repairs and is a distributor of heavy-duty engines, transmissions and power solutions. Workers service equipment such as fire truck engines and generators in hospitals and emergency rooms.

Caterpillar sues union over retiree efforts to regain healthcare

The Illinois-based heavy equipment maker Caterpillar filed lawsuits July 25 that would require the United Auto Workers (UAW) to pay any fines should the courts rule in favor of two suits filed by retirees and spouses seeking to regain healthcare coverage lost during a bitter 1990s

lockout. Such a ruling could cost the company tens of thousands of dollars.

Caterpillar argues that the UAW is behind lawsuits that seek to revoke healthcare concessions it negotiated. “We are disappointed that instead of abiding by its agreements, the UAW would actively encourage and sponsor the retirees’ litigation,” said Dan Day, Caterpillar’s corporate human resources manager. The UAW said it had not received copies of the lawsuit and declined to comment.

Vancouver strike widens

The strike begun July 20 by outside civic workers in Vancouver and surrounding districts of the lower mainland of British Columbia has expanded to include inside workers, bringing the total number of strikers to more than 6,000.

Negotiations are being conducted by various bargaining units of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Talks with inside workers broke off over the weekend, and talks with outside workers are expected to resume this week. Altogether, more than 15,000 civic workers are in contract talks, and some, such as those in the town of Richmond, have returned to work after signing new contracts.

Park workers strike in Montreal

Two hundred twenty members of CUPE at Jean-Drapeau Park in Montreal, Québec, went on strike last week. The park is on the site of Expo 67 and covers more than 200 hectares, but many of the attractions in the park have not yet been affected by the strike.

The strikers have been working without a contract since December 2005, and the two sides are still far apart on the issues of wages and working conditions. The workers include skilled trades as well as security guards and maintenance staff.



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