

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 July 2007

Latin America

Contract miners' strike continues in Chile

The standoff between miners and the state-owned National Copper Corporation (CODELCO) is continuing after 27 days on strike. Cristián Cuevas, President of the National Copper Workers Confederation (CNTC) said tensions are rising as a result of CODELCO's stonewalling.

The miners, not directly hired by CODELCO but employed by private subcontractors, are demanding parity with 14,000 CODELCO miners in the form of decent wages, normal bonuses and health, education and housing benefits. The strike is receiving the support of other miners and workers in Northern Chile. Last week over 1,000 strikers and their supporters from the El Teniente mine—the world's largest underground copper mine—marched 87 kilometers (53 miles) to downtown Santiago.

The state-owned enterprise, which by law supplies ten percent of its profits to the military, has threatened to sack the strikers and discount their wages for the duration of the strike. Strikers say that taking just ten percent of the ten percent that goes to the military would provide enough money to double wages for all the subcontract copper workers in Chile.

Peru: Teacher's strike ended, leadership denounced

The bureaucracy of the Peruvian Teacher's Union (SUTEP) ended a strike against the administration of President Alan García last week despite opposition from the rank and file. García had made the lifting of the strike a condition for negotiations with SUTEP.

The quashing of the strike sparked opposition, with many SUTEP members refusing to return to work. Teachers in the regions of Áncash, Arequipa, Cusco, Piura, Puno and Tumbes denounced SUTEP President Luis Muñoz for betraying their cause and voted to continue the walkout. Robert Huaynalaya, leader of a dissident wing of the union, criticized Muñoz but then agreed to end the strike.

SUTEP teachers are demanding the abrogation of legislation that would make it easier to fire and suspend public school teachers through the imposition of so-called national education standards and open the gate to the privatization of Peru's educational system.

Education Minister Jorge Del Castillo applauded SUTEP's decision to end the strike and indicated that in the eyes of the García administration this meant that the teachers' bureaucracy had accepted the draft legislation as a fact of life. Del Castillo

said that the government would meet with union leaders so that they could better understand the proposed law.

The union's capitulation undercuts other popular struggles. The strike was part of a wave of protests against the government over various social demands. The García administration is increasingly viewed as having turned its back on campaign promises to reduce poverty, and to remedy the country's extreme economic and social inequality caused by the free market economic policies of former presidents Fujimori and Toledo.

Striking fishermen protest in Argentina

Striking fishermen employed on private vessels protested in the port city of Puerto Deseado in the Patagonian Province of Santa Cruz, demanding that employers address their wage demands. The protest, which led to the destruction of equipment and processing plants, was sparked by the refusal of city authorities to meet a delegation of strikers in downtown Puerto Deseado. Hundreds of fishermen had occupied two municipal buildings for a few hours expecting municipal authorities to show up.

Enraged, many of the fisher rampaged through the port destroying company property. Municipal authorities claim that there was nobody to meet the fishers since most municipal officials were meeting Argentine Nestor Kirchner elsewhere in Santa Cruz Province.

United States

Long Beach/LA port clerical workers continue talks past strike deadline

Three weeks after they requested and received a unanimous strike authorization vote from members of the over 900-member office clerical unit (OCU) of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 63, union negotiators submitted their "last, best and final offer" to the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) July 20. Negotiations had continued despite a previous strike threat by union negotiators if the parties could not reach agreement on a new three-year contract by the July 16 deadline. The clerical workers have been without a contract since July 1.

Differences remain over wages and other issues. Management is seeking a 50-cent per hour raise in the \$37.50 per hour minimum, while the union is seeking substantially more. Management wants to create a PPO-style health plan for new hires, a proposal would create a two-tier health insurance system. The most crucial sticking points are contained in PMA-

proposed contract language that could pave the way for outsourcing and job losses through attrition.

The OCU leadership, while admitting it has offered the PMA concessions, would not make them public. Meanwhile, the PMA, in the name of “flexibility,” is pushing contract language that would give management more discretion over the use of temporary workers as well as the replacement of retirees. The result would be the inexorable chipping away of OCU positions.

ILWU longshoremen, as well as the Teamsters and International Association of Machinists have pledged to honor a strike by the OCU. Shippers, meanwhile, are diverting cargo to other ports along the west coast.

The last time there was a work stoppage on the docks—management’s lockout of ILWU dockworkers in 2002—the PMA gained major concessions in the form of two-tier wages, the elimination of 1,000 jobs, and the introduction of nonunion workers in some areas. The Long Beach/LA harbor handles around 40 percent of the nation’s overseas cargo, accounting for between \$1 billion and \$2 billion per day, so any disruption of the flow of cargo would bring major repercussions to the economy, and quite likely federal government intervention.

Struck Kentucky scrap aluminum recycler sues union over letter campaign

Ohio Valley Aluminum in Shelbyville, Kentucky filed suit against the United Steelworkers (USW), charging a union letter campaign aimed at its customers has caused it to lose business. The USW, whose 86 members struck the aluminum scrap metal recycler on June 1, sent out letters to customers charging, “some of the product coming out of the plant appears bowed,” and “loads of billets have been returned to the plant during the strike.”

The company’s lawsuit maintains it “has lost business and suffered other harm.” The *Louisville Courier-Journal* reports that the aluminum recycling industry has been hit by weaker demand because of the downturn in home sales and the decline in the automotive industry.

Ohio Valley Aluminum workers voted to join the steelworkers last fall. The main concern of the USW has been the company’s insistence on having an open shop that would make dues payment optional.

Pennsylvania garment workers rally

About 200 striking garment workers and their supporters held a July 18 rally to marking their 34th day on strike against Tama Manufacturing of Hanover Township, Pennsylvania. Workers first struck on June 15 over the company’s demand for payments for medical coverage amounting to \$170 a month.

Since the company is only offering a two percent annual wage increases over the course of a three-year contract, workers would suffer a net loss. The average garment worker, who makes a mere \$18,000 a year, would see a yearly wage increase of only \$360 while paying out more than \$2,000 for

medical coverage.

Workers strike New York packaging company

Some 150 workers at the Climax Manufacturing Company in Lowville, New York went on strike July 18 after voting down the company’s final offer. No talks are scheduled between the paperboard and packaging company and United Steelworkers Local 1888, which represents the striking workers. The union says the main outstanding issue is wages.

Canada

West coast forestry industry shut by strike

Nearly 7,000 forestry workers in British Columbia went on strike on Saturday, July 21st, closing down the entire industry in that province. No talks are currently planned.

The strikers include loggers and sawmill workers who are members of the United Steelworkers union employed by Island Timberlands and 31 member companies negotiating under Forest Industrial Relations. The union cites work scheduling, contracting out and severance pay as the main issues in the dispute. The provincial Liberal government appointed a mediator to direct talks on a new contract when the last one expired on June 15, but talks have been further complicated because there are four different contracts being negotiated at the same time.

Vancouver city workers walk out

Civic workers in the city of Vancouver, BC began rotating strike action just after their union issued a 72-hour strike notice on the morning of Thursday, July 19. The two-hour walk outs by around 400 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) affected waste transfer and landfill sites. Reports indicate that the main issue in the dispute is wages but the union has said that the job action has been provoked by employers who are seeking a confrontation now in order to avoid one that might jeopardize preparations for the 2010 winter Olympics. The union has said that job action could expand in coming days to include over 1,800 outside workers and may be joined by inside workers as well.



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