

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 August 2007

Grupo Mexico fires 2,176 miners

Grupo Mexico, a transnational company with mines in Mexico, Peru and the United States, declared on Friday that it had fired more than 2,000 striking miners at the Cananea copper mine in Sonora state. The mine is close to the international border between Sonora and the US state of Arizona.

The sackings took place 11 days after the miners had gone on strike in Cananea and other mines (Taxco, Sombrerete and Guerrero). On Tuesday, Mexican authorities had declared the strike “inexistent,” a Mexican legal term that makes the strike illegal and gives the workers 24 hours to return to work. Cananea is the country’s largest copper mine.

Sergio Tolano, leader of the Cananea miners, declared on Saturday that 13 steelworkers’ leaders from the United States and Canada had arrived in Cananea to support the strike, including union officials from Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and Ohio and a representative from the Assarco copper mine in Texas, which is also owned by Grupo Mexico. He also claimed that the union’s 850,000 members had voted to raise funds to support the Cananea miners. Press reports indicate that scores of miners are arriving from nearby Mexican states in solidarity.

Currently, Mexico’s National Miners’ and Metalworkers’ Union is split between supporters of the current leader, Elías Morales, undemocratically appointed by the administration of former President Vicente Fox in 2006, and supporters of former union president Napoleón Gómez. Gomez was removed in the wake of an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coalmine that killed 65 miners. The explosion and the government’s intervention provoked a series of lengthy strikes at Cananea and throughout México.

The striking miners are demanding that Grupo México improve health and safety conditions at the mine and that it reopen a company health clinic for the miners and their families. They are also demanding that

the government of President Felipe Calderón recognize Napoleón Gomez as the union president.

Mexican autoworkers threaten to strike

Workers at the Volkswagen plant in Puebla, México, are demanding an 8.3 percent wage increase for the 10,700 workers at the assembly plant. Union leaders have stated that they are determined not to extend the contract, which expires on August 18, and announced their intention to strike if the wage demands are not addressed.

Strike by Venezuelan autoworkers

Workers at the Toyota assembly plant in the city of Sucre went on strike August 6. The two main issues were wages and outsourcing. The strike ended on Friday, when the company agreed to raise wages by 3,000 Bolivares per day, a 9 percent raise, retroactive to August 1. No progress was made on outsourcing, although Toyota did agree to “study” the issue. Currently, many workers at the plant are employed by outside contractors at a lower wage.

Chicago immigrant workers strike for higher wages

Nonunion immigrant workers at the Cygnus soap factory in Chicago owned by Marietta Corp. struck July 27 after management threatened to terminate workers who could not re-verify Social Security numbers by August 10. The company’s demand for checking Social Security numbers emerged only after the 118 workers, who earn the minimum wage and are overwhelmingly of Mexican origin, sent representatives to management to request a wage increase.

One year ago, Cygnus received “no-match” letters from the Social Security Administration. But after learning it was not legally obliged to act on the letters, the issue was dropped. Only in the wake of wage demands from workers did management resurrect the letters and issue an ultimatum.

In reaction to the strike, Marietta has contracted with a temporary agency called Staffmark to supply

strikebreakers.

Two workers injured by falling rock in Tennessee limestone mine

Two miners installing roof bolts in a limestone mine were thrown from a lift bucket when a 4-ton rock broke loose, hit the bucket and caused them to plummet more than 40 feet to the mine's floor. Terry Wilson, 67, received a bruised hip. Forty-five-year-old Richard Blunkall suffered a broken back in two places, a broken left arm, a broken leg and broken ribs on his left side.

The accident occurred August 8 at a mine about 20 miles northeast of Knoxville, Tennessee, operated by Ohio-based Oglebay Norton Co. Blunkall's wife, Terry Blunkall, told Knoxville's WATE 6 News, "I thought he was dead. It scared me to death." Referring to the Utah coalmine collapse, she said, "You are sitting there, praying for those people and their families, and what they are going through. And you really don't know what they are going through until you go through the same thing."

Northern youth workers locked out

Seventeen youth treatment workers in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, were locked out by their employer at the Trailcross Treatment Centre last week before their union could issue a strike notice.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and provide care to youth with psychiatric or developmental problems at the non-profit charitable facility. Trailcross is government funded and is run by Edmonton-based Bosco Homes, which reportedly warned its employees not to talk to the media regarding the dispute. According to PSAC, Bosco Homes is offering a wage increase below the inflation rate and is trying to restrict workers' ability to file grievances against the company. Emergency arrangements had to be made for eight youth at the center, and a federal conciliator has been appointed to facilitate talks.



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