

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 August 2007

Latin America

University employees strike in Oaxaca, Mexico

Members of the University Workers and Employees Union of the Oaxaca Autonomous University (STEUABJO) walked off their jobs Saturday morning in response to the administration's refusal to address their contract demands.

STEUABJO's general secretary, Rosendo Ramirez, denounced the university for refusing to negotiate with the union. The union struck July 21, but the government's Mediation Agency suspended the strike on August 17 and then extended the suspension until August 30. STEUABJO leaders claim that the repeated suspensions are a way of wearing the workers down so that the university can impose its own terms.

Mexican court allows miners' strikes to continue

On August 16, Mexico's courts declared the strikes by Mexican miners against Grupo Mexico to be legal. The transnational company owns mines in Peru, Mexico and the United States.

The strikes began in the Sombrerete zinc mine and the Cananea copper mine in the states of Zacatecas and Sonora on July 30 over working conditions and recognition by the Calderon administration of the union's president, Napoleon Gomez. At first, a labor court had declared the strikes illegal, and company management had given the Cananea miners 24 hours to return to work or be fired.

Panama: Strike over worker's death

Panama's Construction Union (SUNTRACS) declared a national strike for August 21 in the wake of the death of one of its members, Osvaldo Lorenzo, during a dispute with workers belonging to a rival union. Lorenzo was shot in the chest. SUNTRACS Secretary Saul Mendez said the strike is meant to be a warning to the government to clamp down on what he terms "illegal company unions." Mendez indicated the strike will also protest the high cost of living.

United States

New York Delphi workers petition for union

official's ouster

Workers at the Delphi Thermal Systems plant in Lockport, New York, submitted a petition signed by more than 580 workers to United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 686 calling for a confidence vote aimed at ousting the plant's union shop chairman. The Buffalo business journal *Business First* received an email from one of the petitioners saying, "The perception on the floor is that our chairman does not have the best interests of his members at heart."

Delphi workers nationwide voted in June by a 67 percent margin to ratify a contract that cut wages by 40 to 50 percent. Workers at the Lockport plant, however, rejected the contract by 80 percent. The petition aimed at removing the shop chairman is undoubtedly connected to this widespread dissatisfaction with the contract among Lockport workers.

Local 686 President Daniel Schrader claims that because there are no specific charges in the petition, there are no grounds for a confidence vote. Bargaining on local issues at Lockport began on July 30.

Car dealer kills two employees who asked for raise

The owner of an East Point, Georgia, car dealership admitted killing two employees who had been pressing him for pay raises over an extended period. Rolandas Milinavicius, who owned and operated RM Auto International, was charged with two counts of murder for the shooting deaths of Inga Contreras and Martynas Simokaitis.

The sole activity of Milinavicius's company was supplying cars to Lithuania. Both the owner and the employees were from Lithuania. According to police, the dealership owner was under stress and claimed he snapped when he killed his only two employees.

Contractor sentenced for using homeless to remove asbestos

A building contractor was sentenced in a Roanoke, Virginia, federal courtroom to 21 months in prison for violating the Clean Air Act. John Edward Callahan, 56, the owner of Environmental Construction, was originally

charged by prosecutors with hiring three homeless workers in 2005 to remove asbestos from the ceiling and pipes of the State & City Building in Roanoke.

Callahan paid the workers \$10 an hour and only provided raincoats and paper masks to carry out the operation, instead of federally approved equipment. The asbestos was packed into trash bags and then shipped to a regular landfill instead of to a hazardous materials facility. Callahan did not have a license to handle the asbestos.

Callahan's lawyer argued that the three workers had addresses and therefore were not homeless, a strategy aimed at getting a lower sentence for his client. A stiffer 27-month sentence could have been applied if the workers were homeless and therefore considered vulnerable. Callahan received the lower sentence even though an address for one of the workers was Rescue Missions.

Connecticut workers strike to halt rising healthcare costs

Healthcare workers at 23 group homes for the retarded operated by Sunrise Northeast in central and eastern Connecticut struck August 17 after negotiators refused to provide a guarantee in their new two-year contract that the cost of medical care would not outstrip wages. The New England Health Care Employees, District 1199, which represents the 189 striking workers, is seeking a 3 percent raise combined with a limit on increases in medical costs that will not undermine workers' wage increase.

In 2006, Sunrise Northeast workers received a \$476 wage increase. However, the increases in medical costs for single coverage went up by \$561, two-person coverage by \$1,089, and family coverage rose by \$2,442. Sunrise Northeast is owned by a Miami-based organization contracted by the Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation.

Union charges Rhode Island police with brutality in attack on protester

Union organizers charged police brutality in the assault on a 22-year-old woman protesting a North Providence, Rhode Island, restaurant chain alleged to deny workers minimum wages and overtime. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) issued a statement claiming Alexandra Svoboda "was attacked while she was complying with orders by the NPPD (North Providence Police Department) to move towards the sidewalk. Alexandra was then tackled and brutalized by the officers, suffering a grotesquely broken and dislocated knee and a ruptured vascular artery."

Protesters were marching to Jackie's Galaxy restaurant when police stopped the march and the incident occurred.

Demonstrators demanded that the owner of Jackie's Galaxy cease using the New York supplier HWH, which the IWW claims violates basic labor rights.

Svoboda was charged with three felony counts of assaulting a police officer and two misdemeanors. The union says it will call upon the state's attorney general to investigate the case.

New York healthcare workers strike

More than 100 workers at two healthcare facilities on Long Island, New York, walked out on strike last week. The workers, who provide healthcare support at the Ronkonkoma and Hempstead locations of Premier Home Health Care Services Inc., are protesting their own lack of healthcare benefits.

Workers voted to join the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 last year and are seeking benefits similar to those received by workers at Premier Home Health Care Services locations in New York City. Wages, less than \$8 an hour at the struck facilities, are also abysmal.

Canada

Vancouver civic strike continues

Even as two more nearby municipalities signed contract with their workers, the strike by both inside and outside civic workers in Vancouver, British Columbia, is going into its second month.

Currently, more than 5,000 workers from three different locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), from garbage collectors to librarians, are involved in strike action, and negotiators say there is no end in sight to strike actions that began as early as July 20. Last week, the city broke off freshly resumed negotiations, claiming the unions had ended an agreed-on news blackout, even though they did so to complain publicly about the slow pace of talks.

Issues in the dispute include wages, contracting out, and pay equity—particularly for library workers who currently earn about C\$7 an hour less than their counterparts in Toronto.



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