

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 August 2007

Latin America

Argentine strikers clash with police

Employees of the Census and Statistics Institute (INDEC), who have been striking for over 42 days, clashed with police last Wednesday in Buenos Aires. The strikers were attempting to rally at INDEC headquarters to expose the latest unemployment statistics, which contain serious flaws as a consequence of the poor quality work being performed by strikebreakers.

Early in the morning a large number of police assembled at the intersection near the rally site to block the strikers, members of the Association of Public Employees (ATE). The mobilized workers attempted to rally twice. The third time they were pushed and violently chased away and several workers were beaten.

Chile: victims of 1907 massacre found

The remains of some 820 victims of the first mass labor struggle in Chile's history were disinterred last Tuesday. In 1907, workers took part in the massive "nitrite strike," shutting down 102 nitrite mines in northern Chile. The strikers and their families marched into the northern city of Iquique to protest their conditions and were allowed refuge in a local school.

However, President Pedro Montt ordered government troops to move in, surround the school and massacre the miners, their wives and children. Thousands were killed.

A group of experts spent the last month in the northern city of Iquique exhuming the victims from a mass grave as part of a project to reconstruct the history of the bloodbath. In addition to bodies, many of them showing bullet and knife wounds, they have found the victims' personal effects, clothing and shoes.

Meatpackers on strike in Chile

On August 20, over 1,200 meatpacking workers employed at Agrosuper's Lo Mirnada plant walked off their jobs to protest job insecurity, management abuse and the sacking of union leaders. The plant is located near the city of Rancagua, south of Santiago. The workers are demanding that management agree to put an end to unjustified firings and grant wage increases and other benefits. The strike has been marked by violent clashes with police.

On August 21, striking workers attempting to set up a

barricade across a highway near the Lo Mirnada plant clashed with police. Eight workers were arrested. The next day police assaulted the meatpackers. Two children were nearly suffocated by tear gas and five workers were arrested.

The battle took place at 11 p.m. after an assembly of 1,000 workers overwhelmingly rejected, by a show of hands, a management offer. Workers at two other Agrosuper plants are considering joining the strike.

The company claims the strike is illegal and is the result of outside agitators who took advantage of a minor conflict within the plant over food charges at the company cafeteria to inject their political agenda.

Mexico: Five-day strike at the University of Oaxaca

Eleven hundred administrative workers at the University of Oaxaca in southwest Mexico occupied 19 departments in that institution for five days beginning August 18. The strike, originally scheduled for July 21, was postponed to August 17 through the intervention of Mexico's Labor Arbitration and Conciliation Board (JLCyA). On August 17 the board intervened to postpone it once again to August 30. JLCyA's action provoked a walkout the following day.

Workers accepted the university's offer of 2.2 million pesos (US\$200,000) to be distributed among the strikers. In addition seven jobs formerly performed by nonunion members will be assigned to the union and workers' wages during the strike will not be discounted. The strikers warned that the strike would resume if the university hired workers from outside the union to perform their jobs.

Grupo Mexico backs down in Cananea strike

The transnational Grupo Mexico, one of the world's largest copper producers, took back its threat to replace striking workers at the Cananea mine. The strike, in its fourth week, has been declared illegal by the Mexican government, giving the company the right to replace the strikers.

Two weeks ago, management gave workers notice either to return to work or be replaced. On Wednesday a company manager, who chose to remain anonymous, declared that "we should proceed with caution and we will avoid doing things that may have [unforseen] results."

The union contract at Cananea ends this Monday; negotiations are deadlocked.

United States

No new talks in Illinois teachers' strike

A federal mediator declined to schedule new negotiations in the strike by several hundred teachers in the Harlem, Illinois school district. The Harlem Education Association notified the school superintendent August 20 that teachers from the district's high school, middle school and nine elementary schools would not be teaching as the new academic school year started, idling of 8,000 students.

On August 24, teachers handed out thousands of fliers to counteract what they believe is disinformation by the school district aimed at turning parents against them. In the informational leaflet the union points out base pay for Harlem teachers is \$31,000 a year, which trails nearby school districts. It notes that in the last contract, when the district pleaded budgetary problems, they received annual pay increases of 0, 1 and 1.5 percent while healthcare costs went up 33 percent.

With the district sitting on a \$10 million surplus and millions of dollars in state aid coming in, management officials dragged their feet in negotiations and did not provide the union with a healthcare proposal until last week. The school district had been holding daily press briefings. But on the same day that teachers began canvassing, they cancelled their 2 p.m. briefing.

Pennsylvania transit strike ends

Drivers and maintenance workers in Kittanning, Pennsylvania ended their 12-day strike against Town & Country Transit August 23 after the company revised their contract demands. The 18 members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1738 voted unanimously to accept a new three-year contract that provides 4 percent annual raises and leaves healthcare provisions intact.

Originally, Town & Country management had been pressing for cuts in healthcare while offering a 3 percent raise. The union wanted a 5 percent increase. Workers will also be receiving one more vacation day as well as an extra personal day.

The transit authority board, comprised of six surrounding communities, was to hold a special meeting at the beginning of this week to ratify the new agreement.

Lockout at Illinois die casting plant enters second month

Some 100 workers at Quad City Die Cast in Moline, Illinois have entered their second month of a lockout after rejecting the company's final offer. The United Electrical Workers Union opposed the offer due to provisions allowing the hiring of temporary or part-time workers.

"People in the Quad Cities don't want factories here to become Wal-Mart where everybody works temporary," union representative Tim Curtin told WQAD-TV. The

company is currently attempting to meet production goals through the use of management and temporary workers.

Canada

Carleton University staff poised to strike

Nonacademic staff at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario voted overwhelmingly for strike action last week with 94 percent in favor. They will be in a legal strike position September 6, the day before classes begin.

Seven hundred professional, technical and office staff at the university, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been working without a contract since June of this year and are fighting for improvements in wages, benefits and job security. Administrators at the school have said there will be no disruption to classes or student services in the event of a strike, but that students will be asked to cross the picket line to attend classes. The union has said that management is offering them less than half the raise they granted to faculty this year and are demanding other concessions as well. CUPE negotiators offered to continue mediated talks through the Labor Day weekend, but school officials refused.

Calgary school strike expands

The number of maintenance workers on strike against the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) in Alberta continues to grow as painters prepared to join sheet metal workers, carpenters and plumbers in their job action this week. If negotiations break down this week, electricians could also go on strike, which would mean that over 100 employees of the CBE would be off the job when the new school year begins.

Strike action began August 13 when the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters went on strike against the CBE. Contracts for all five unions representing skilled trades expired at the end of January this year. The main issues center on wages, benefits and working conditions. Skilled trades workers can make at least 20 percent more doing the same work in the private sector. The school board is also in contract talks with caretakers and teachers. It is restricted by the provincial Tory government's operating grant increase of only 3 percent.



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