

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 September 2007

## Latin America

### Mexican court to decide on miners' strike

A Mexican district court will decide on September 25 whether or not to uphold a decision by the Federal Conciliation and Mediation Department that ruled a strike by copper miners in the Sonoran Cananea copper mine can continue. The miners walked out on July 30 demanding improved health and safety measures in the mine and that the government of President Felipe Calderón stop persecuting the former president of the miners' union, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia.

Grupo México, the transnational that owns the mine, is petitioning the court to declare the strike illegal, claiming that the workers' demands have become political and are therefore illegitimate.

### Sugar cane workers on strike in Guyana

Fourteen thousand Guyanan sugar cane workers walked off their jobs last Wednesday. The cutters are demanding a wage increase to make up for inflation. The strikers are members of the Guyanan Agricultural Workers Union. They are demanding a 12 percent raise to make up for the 12 percent increase in prices that resulted from a 16 percent Value Added Tax imposed in 2006.

The government-owned Guyana Sugar Corp. declared that it lost US\$2 million (€1.45 million) during the first two days of the strike. The company, administered by the British firm Tate and Lyle, says that it cannot afford more than a 6.5 percent wage increase.

### Uruguay: Health minister cancels wage offer in dispute with public health employees

On September 13, protesting public health employees, picketing a hospital under construction, blocked Health Minister María Julia Muñoz from leaving the building moments after she had inaugurated a new wing. The minister was not allowed to proceed until she acknowledged that she had read a picket sign demanding an increase in pay.

The minister retaliated by canceling a wage offer. The

20 percent wage increase would have taken effect this January.

Health employees plan to carry out a 48-hour protest strike on September 18 and 19 and a 72-hour strike on September 25. Union leaders warned that if their demands are not addressed, they will launch a system-wide strike on October 1 and occupy health centers on October 8.

### Gasoline station employees strike in Argentina

Gasoline station employees in Mendoza Province, in western Argentina, carried out a 24-hour strike last Saturday, demanding a monthly wage of 1,800 pesos (US\$570, €410), up from 1100 pesos (€250). The strike shut down gas, diesel and natural gas refueling stations across the province, affecting taxis and jitney service.

## United States

### Workers walk off the job at California laundry and uniform service

Some 30 workers took part in a walkout September 11 at two Prudential Overall Supply facilities in Milpitas, California, to protest repressive working conditions and low wages. The union, UNITE HERE, has filed unfair labor practice charges against the company over issues such as illegal suspension, surveillance, discrimination, intimidation and harassment, all of which are aimed at frustrating unionizing drives at the company's operations.

More than 20 unfair labor practice charges have been filed at 11 Prudential facilities that provide uniforms and laundry services in California and Arizona. Seven of those charges are connected to the Milpitas facilities where the walkout erupted.

Prudential has federal, state and municipal contracts worth millions of dollars. It is the largest regional uniform and laundry service in California and employs 1,700 people in 10 states.

### Wall Street Journal reporters picket against contract offer

About 35 *Wall Street Journal* reporters picketed

outside the newspaper's offices in Manhattan September 10 to protest a new three-year contract offer that provides annual 3 percent raises but increases healthcare premiums. Wearing placards that said "Give us a fair deal," *Journal* reporters said their protest was aimed at current parent company Dow Jones as well as the paper's future owner, Rupert Murdoch.

Dow Jones CEO Richard Zannino issued an internal message to employees on the same day as the picketing, which said in one breath that the company would "increase profits by strengthening and growing our products and brands, not by slashing costs," and in the next breath declared, "there will be some changes" and "where job cuts are unavoidable, we will communicate that as soon as practical."

It is expected that a final merger of Dow Jones into Murdoch's News Corp. will take place in the fourth quarter of this year following a decision by the company's major shareholders.

## **Canada**

### **Wildcats sweep Alberta construction projects**

Over the last week, carpenters, scaffolders, roofers and other construction workers have walked off several massive building sites in the oil-rich province of Alberta to protest a provincial labour law drastically restricting their right to strike. The wildcat strike stalled work at the Horizon oil sands project near Fort McMurray, at the Opti-Nexen Long Lake project near Anzac, at Shell's Scotford plant in Fort Saskatchewan, and at the main Petro-Canada refinery and Air Liquide plant near Edmonton. Other smaller building sites have also been affected. Currently, there is more than C\$150 billion worth of industrial construction either underway or ready to go in the province.

The workers are striking against rules in the Alberta Labour Relations Code that stipulate if three quarters of the province's 25 construction unions reach a contract settlement, the remaining 25 percent are forced to accept binding arbitration whilst forfeiting any right to strike. In the current round of bargaining, 19 of the 25 unions ratified contracts, thereby nullifying the 4,000-strong carpenters' union's 97 percent strike mandate. The carpenters are demanding wages comparable to the other major trades in the province. The employers' organization, Construction Labour Relations Association Alberta, has used the restrictive provisions for decades to pit one trade against another

and drive down wages in the industry.

The right-wing Conservative government of Alberta, which has ruled the province virtually unchallenged in the post-war era, instituted the repressive labour law in 1982 after a massive trades strike in 1980 forced construction employers to concede to many of the workers demands. The government and Iris Evans, the minister of employment, have refused to acknowledge worker demands to amend the law and have ordered an end to the job action.

The government has been backed not only by the leaders of the trades unions that have already ratified contracts but also by the head of the Alberta Regional Council of Carpenters and Allied Workers, Martyn Piper, who has repeatedly stated that his union is "doing everything in its power to ensure people go to work". This has emboldened the companies to victimize workers participating in the wildcat actions. Already, 200 workers have been fired in Fort McMurray and scores of others in outlying areas.



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