

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 September 2007

Latin America

Venezuela: strike at the Guasare coal mine

Truck drivers employed by the Guasare coal mine in Venezuela's Zulia state went on strike last week. Pickets blocked the entrance to the mine, and management suspended operations. The truck drivers want an increase in their per-trip remuneration and safer working conditions. By the end of the week, the truck drivers were back on the job, but the outcome is unclear.

The company is a joint venture of state-owned Carbozulia and two transnationals, Peabody Energy and Anglo American. Guasare Coal is the largest coal producer in Venezuela, mining 6.8 million tons each year. The coal is used to make steel and to generate electricity.

Brazil: autoworkers on strike

Nine thousand autoworkers employed by Nissan, Renault and Volkswagen in Paraná state walked off their jobs last Thursday in a strike over wages. The workers are demanding an 8.5 percent wage increase plus a one-time bonus. The three firms offered 7.44 percent.

At the struck plants, Volkswagen produces 830 vehicles daily; Renault, 700; and Nissan, 90.

Paraguayan teachers on strike

Twenty thousand teachers in Asunción, Paraguay, have been on strike for more than a week. Lázaro Rojas, general secretary of the National Educators Union, declared that teachers earn "a miserable pittance" and, despite constant negotiations with the Education Ministry, have not gained any pay adjustment.

On Thursday, 10,000 teachers rallied at the legislature to protest their low pay. The teachers' salaries range from US\$45 to US\$130 a month. "Nobody can live on what we make, and many of us are forced to work two or even three shifts," said Rojas. The educators are demanding a 20 percent raise.

A number of legislators said the government would not grant any wage increases to the teachers because it has no money, unless it issues bonds. Marta Lafuente, vice minister at the Education Ministry, accused the teachers of making students suffer. "There is one long teachers' strike each year," she complained.

United States

Firings escalate at Illinois plant

A group of largely Hispanic workers in Aurora, Illinois, who walked out in support of another group of victimized workers, were themselves fired September 20. The first group of 8 workers were fired one day earlier after management at the Ballco Manufacturing plant informed them that the personal information associated with their Social Security numbers did not match with that provided by the Social Security Administration. The firings of the 8 workers sparked sympathy picketing by another 15 workers, which led to their subsequent firing.

In the past, employers were not legally required to take action on so-called "no-match" letters from the Social Security Administration. The no-match letter would usually be ignored by a company, or would have been used by management to threaten workers who spoke up over working conditions or sought to unionize a plant. But starting in August, the Department of Homeland Security announced a rule requiring companies to clear up discrepancies in employment records within 90 days or face fines.

Illinois teachers strike over wages

Union and administrative negotiators for the Cahokia School District in an East St. Louis, Illinois, suburb failed to set up talks over the weekend as the strike by 300 teachers and 200 service workers and secretaries entered its second week. The strike began September 17 after the two sides deadlocked over wages. Teachers have insisted on a one-year contract that includes a 3.5 percent raise while the school district refused to go higher than 2.25 percent.

The school district is seeking to make teachers the scapegoats for the district's \$5.3 million debt. The state of Illinois has kept the district on a watch list for 10 years over its finances. School officials are using the threat by the state of imposing a financial oversight panel as a cudgel against teachers.

The strike affects some 4,300 students. It is the first strike in the district since 1975.

Unfavorable NLRB decision brings end to Illinois strike

The National Labor Relations Board dismissed charges last week by Boilermakers Local 1600 against the heavy metal parts maker Fox Valley Forge in Aurora, Illinois. While the union has said it will appeal the decision, the hardships imposed on the largely Mexican immigrant workforce as a result of the six-month walkout have basically brought an end to the strike.

Workers wanted to put an end to a dual labor compensation system that paid some workers hourly wages while others were paid piecemeal. Higher-seniority workers received in the neighborhood of \$12 an hour while low-seniority workers found themselves unable to advance much past \$7.50 an hour.

A majority of the 50-plus workers who work at Fox Valley Forge immigrated from the same Mexican village, and some are well into their third decade working at the plant.

Canada

Carleton University staff to vote on new contract

Seven hundred professional, technical and office staff at Carleton University in Ottawa, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2424, will vote on a tentative contract this week. The workers have been on strike since September 5 after working without a contract since June of this year.

The members are fighting for improvements in wages, benefits and job security. The strike affected all office work, IT support, libraries and other technical support functions, although there was no disruption to classes during the dispute. The strike centered on union accusations that management was offering them less than half the raise they granted to faculty this year while demanding other concessions.

Ontario casino workers end strike

Eight hundred and fifty members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 1090 organized at the

Great Blue Heron Charity Casino in Port Perry, Ontario, have narrowly voted to ratify a new four-year contract. The pact provides a C\$2.20 per hour wage increase with some increased dental coverage, vacation provisions and signing bonuses. The dealers, slot attendants, food and beverage workers, and maintenance staff had been on strike since September 7.

The union membership had given the CAW a strong 92 percent strike mandate and was adamant that their officials should negotiate a three-year deal with a pay structure competitive with agreements reached at other casinos in the province. However, last week they were presented by the union with a tentative contract that failed to meet these requirements. Sixty-one percent of the voting membership turned down the offer.

After waiting a week, the union leadership placed another offer before the membership that also failed to meet their initial demands. This time, workers narrowly voted to accept the offer, with many workers voicing their dissatisfaction before reluctantly ratifying the deal.



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