

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 October 2007

Latin America

Peruvian miners strike

Two thousand employees of Southern Perú went on strike October 2 over outstanding issues in contract negotiations with the company, a subsidiary of Grupo México, a transnational mining corporation. The strike shut down the mines of Ilo, Toquepala and Cuajone in southern Peru. In addition to decent wages, the miners are demanding a better grievance-resolution system and a one-year contract.

Miners consider that a three-year contract would prevent them from participating in expected increases in world copper prices and lower production costs.

Technological advances in smelting have made it possible to recover increasing quantities of secondary metals (molybdenum, in particular) and have reduced costs at Southern Perú mines while copper prices increased, leading to windfall profits for the company.

The government of President Alan García reacted by declaring the strike illegal, opening the door to repression by police and company goons. At week's end, however, the three unions that represent the striking miners and Southern Perú's management had agreed to government mediation.

Peru is the third highest producer of copper. A lengthy strike at Southern could lower this year's production of the metal by 10 percent. The unions are also threatening a national miners' strike on November 5.

Argentina: teachers demand investigation into teacher's murder

Public school and public university teachers went on strike October 4 to protest the killing of their colleague, Carlos Fuentealba. Fuentealba, a 40-year-old educator, was struck in the head and killed last April 4 by a tear gas grenade that had been launched by the police during a teachers' protest in Neuquén Province.

Union leaders acknowledge that the officer directly responsible for Fuentealba's death is in police custody but demand that those who are "politically responsible" and ordered the police repression be charged with the crime, including Neuquén governor Jorge Sobish.

Professors at public universities joined the strike in solidarity with the teachers.

On the first day of the strike, thousands of teachers mobilized and rallied across Argentina. In Buenos Aires, a mass demonstration took place, and striking teachers handed a petition to the House of Deputies' Human Rights Committee.

National strike in Dominican Republic

A 24-hour general strike took place in the Dominican Republic

on October 2. The strike was led by the Alternative Social Forum's Collective (FSA). The government of President Leonel Fernandez would not release its assessment on how many participated in the strike, but FSA leaders claimed that the protest affected the entire country, particularly in the northern and southern regions. It estimated that 85 percent of the workers participated.

The demands of the strike were for better social conditions, including an immediate increase in wages, a cut in fuel prices and a subsidy for student bus fares. The FSA also called for an end to the eviction of poor people.

President Fernandez had denounced the opposition Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) for its support of the strike and urged workers to ignore it.

This was the second national strike in three months.

Municipal employees protest in Chile

The majority of the 45,000 workers employed by 345 Chilean municipalities walked off their jobs October 1 to protest draft legislation that will give mayors the power to dictate wages, working conditions and the number of workers. Oscar Yañez, spokesperson for the strikers, estimated that 97 percent of the municipal employees had participated in the protest strike.

Exploitation of agricultural labor in Brazil

An Associated Press report published in the *El Paso Times* October 1 exposes working conditions in the Brazilian ethanol industry. More than half a million agricultural workers cut sugar cane under subhuman conditions to provide the raw material for the ethanol that powers 30 percent of Brazil's cars.

Brazil is also the largest exporter of ethanol. The value of ethanol exports in 2006 was US\$1.6 billion.

Entire fortunes are made from the labor of the sugar cane cutters, who are often forced to work 12-hour days at very low wages. The top wage in the fields is US\$420 a month.

The AP report quotes María Cristina Gonzaga, a Labor Ministry official: "In the 1980s, a sugar cane cutter was expected to cut 6 to 8 tons of cane. Now the owners demand 10 to 12 tons and those that don't meet that quota are fired."

The sugar cane is cut under the hot sun. The job causes a number of bone and muscle lesions; workers' eyes and lungs are damaged by ash from fields that have been burned to make it easier to cut the sugar cane.

In São Paulo State alone, 18 sugar cane workers have died and many more have been injured.

Gonzaga claims that the Labor Ministry does not have the resources to combat the exploitation of the workers and to police all the plantations.

An anti-slavery unit of the Labor Ministry resigned in

September, complaining of political interference after some legislators tried to interfere with a raid on one of Pará state's main ethanol producers. The anti-slavery unit had discovered that the company forced 1,000 cane cutters to work 13 hours a day while charging them exorbitant sums for unsanitary food, and providing them with overcrowded living quarters and contaminated water.

United States

Mediator calls for new talks in strike by Ohio teachers

A mediator called for contract talks between representatives for teachers and the Harrison Hills school district for the towns of Hopedale and Cadiz, Ohio, to resume October 9 after a weeklong strike by 140 teachers. The strike erupted September 30 after teachers, who had gone since last June without an agreement, rejected the school board's two-year contract offer that included annual wage increases of 2.5 and 3 percent as insufficient.

The school board ignited considerable opposition, not only from teachers, but from parents and students as well, when it moved to hire Michigan-based Huffmaster Crisis Management. The Michigan-based corporation has provided both replacement workers and security guards to aid the strikebreaking operation. Anticipating this opposition, Harrison Hills superintendent James Drexler attempted to crush any demonstration of support for teachers by announcing "normal attendance policies will be in effect for students. Attendance will be taken." A student with 10 recorded absences would be subject to truancy charges while nine days would bar a student from receiving credit for a semester-length class.

The following day, attendance plummeted, with only 36 percent of students attending, while the majority of students honored picket lines or were pulled from school by their parents. Some 450 parents have signed a petition to have the school shut down during the duration of the strike due to unsafe conditions.

Meanwhile, three teachers were struck on picket lines by vehicles driven by Huffmaster security guards, and an out-of-state strikebreaker struck a fourth picket. Picketeer Jeff Nozer witnessed the accident that sent sixth-grade teacher Karen Hanzle to the hospital. He told WTOV Channel 9, "I had heard that the driver of that car stated that he was not going to stop, and he didn't, I saw that, he did not stop. He just kept plowing right through the crowd of teachers."

Pennsylvania Wal-Mart workers awarded additional money for being denied pay

A Philadelphia judge last week awarded an additional \$62 million to 124,506 current and former Pennsylvania Wal-Mart workers who won a 2006 jury trial "that the defendant required its employees to work without pay by directing them not to record their hours on Wal-Mart's computerized pay system." The 2006 decision awarded \$78.5 million to 186,000 workers.

Attorneys for the workers requested the additional money based on a Pennsylvania law that requires employers who fail to pay wages to pay workers either \$500 or 25 percent of total wages due, whichever is greater. A Wal-Mart spokesperson followed the company's previous hollow line of declaring that workers voluntarily skipped breaks. "While we discourage that practice, an employer should not be penalized when an employee does this on their own," the spokesperson claimed.

The policy of pressing workers to work off the clock was widely practiced by the company and has resulted in several legal cases. Currently, 72,000 workers in New Jersey and another 56,000 in Minnesota are pursuing class-action suits over the same issue.

Canada

Alberta unions challenge labour laws

In the wake of a week of wildcat strike activity by carpentry trades in Alberta's oil patch, four of the province's construction unions have initiated a constitutional challenge to restrictive labor laws. In September, hundreds of carpenters and scaffolders slowed work at a number of mega-projects by walking out to protest a legal restriction on their right to strike. Despite an overwhelming 98 percent strike mandate, the union was prohibited from striking because labor legislation dictates that if 75 percent of all construction trade unions ratify agreements, the remaining unions automatically lose their right to strike. Currently in Alberta, 19 of the 25 construction unions have ratified, leaving trades such as the plumbers, roofers and pipefitters alongside the carpenters at the mercy of binding arbitration.

Despite a red-hot economy driven by high oil prices and extensive tar sands development, wages for hourly workers in the province are falling behind inflation. As a result of the economic "boom," prices for food, clothing, housing and other basic necessities are skyrocketing. In the past seven months, wages haven't increased at all, even before factoring in the province's 5.1 percent inflation rate. Alberta has the lowest rate of unionization of any Canadian province and some of the most restrictive labor laws.

In the current construction dispute, union officials worked to break the wildcat strikes by promising to launch legal actions to overturn the restrictive labor legislation. The court challenge relies heavily on a recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling in British Columbia that in a narrowly worded decision affirmed collective bargaining rights as protected under the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Northern Ontario bus drivers strike

Motor Coach operators and dispatchers set up picket lines in North Bay, Sudbury and Timmins last week. The 50 workers are organized by the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference and are employed by the Ontario Northern Transportation Commission. The dispute affects all bus and bus parcel delivery services in Northern Ontario and the Highway 11 and 69 routes into Toronto. Workers were forced to accept wage freezes in the past decade to prop up commission profits. There are some routes where wages have remained the same since 1992.



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