

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 October 2007

## **Twenty-one perish in Colombian mine collapse**

On Saturday, October 13, a gold mine collapse trapped 50 miners in Suarez, Colombia, 350 kilometers south of Bogotá, the nation's capital. Twenty-one miners were killed and 26 were injured.

On September 9 the Geology and Mining Institute—a government agency—ordered the mine closed due to unsafe conditions. However, the apparent discovery of a new gold vein drove many of the inhabitants of Suarez to the mine. Suarez is a desperately poor city of 5,000, located 350 kilometers south of Bogotá.

Fifteen of the dead victims are women; it is their job to clean the metal that has been dug out. The gold is then sold to brokers at US \$14/gram. The current world price exceeds US \$23/gram.

Many such informal mines operate in Colombia, often with minimal safety precautions. Accidents are common. In February 30 miners died when a pocket of methane gas blew up a coal mine in Sardinata in northeast Colombia. In 2006 six miners died in the explosion of a small coal mine. Three others suffocated in poisonous fumes.

## **Buenos Aires' teachers threaten to strike**

The Buenos Aires' Educators' Federation (FEB), representing public school teachers, has voted to strike for 48 hours to demand improved wages. A sister organization, the Buenos Aires' Educators Union (SUTEBA), rejected the strike call and announced it would continue negotiations with the Education Ministry.

SUTEBA tentatively accepted a government offer of a bonus of 7 percent plus an undisclosed wage increase. The onetime bonus would not affect the base salary of 970 pesos. The percent increase in bonus still leaves teachers behind the nation's inflation, which government officials Buenos Aires' Educators Union estimate at 8 to 10 percent. Most economists think that the government in purposely underestimating the inflation rate and, in reality the rate is twice as much.

FEB is also demanding a "massive reordering of job categories," a reference to the fact that promotions have been frozen for 15 years. FEB leaders have yet to set a date for the strike.

## **Northern California nurses strike hospital chain**

Almost 5,000 nurses at fifteen Northern California hospitals went on strike October 10 against the Sutter Health Chain over health insurance and staffing issues. The California Nurses Association charges that while wages have risen and the hospital chain is observing nurse-to-patient ratios, Sutter has reduced the number of nurses' assistants.

"We're doing the lab work, we're doing what the aides used to do," a striking nurse told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The strike last two days but two of Sutter's hospitals signed a five-day contract for replacement nurses; something the nurses' union says could be termed a lockout if they are not permitted to return to work.

In 2006 Sutter's net income rocketed from \$442 million to \$587 million while profits jumped from \$334 million to \$428 million. According to *Sutter Corporate Watch*, Sutter is legally a "non-profit" organization, but it is comprised of dozens of for profit and non-profit subsidiaries. The watchdog group has charged, "Some Sutter hospitals have earned such incredibly high profits that they're rare in virtually any industry."

## **Five workers injured in Washington state explosion**

Five workers were injured October 5 when a truck carrying 8,000 gallons of propane blew up at the Atlas Castings & Technology foundry in Tacoma, Washington. Chuck McDonald, the 64-year-old driver of the truck, was covered with burns over 75 percent of his body and remains in critical condition. The fireball that erupted flew pieces of the truck over hundreds of yards and brought down power lines that cut off electricity to some 13,000 Tacoma Power customers.

## **Vancouver municipal workers vote on contracts**

After a twelve-week strike, five thousand inside, outside and library workers in Vancouver, British Columbia, voted on contracts last week based on non-binding recommendations handed down by an appointed mediator. The workers, organized by three separate Canadian Union of Public Employee (CUPE) locals, have engaged in a bitter confrontation with the right-wing led Vancouver City Council since last July. The dispute is already the second longest in the city's history.

The largest local, CUPE Local 15, representing 2,500 building inspectors, recreation workers, civic theatre employees, by-law enforcement officers, cleaners and ancillary staff voted in favour of the recommendations by 73 per cent. The deal had been recommended by the local union leadership. The new contract provides for a wage increase of 17.5 per cent over five years and a \$1,000 signing bonus, a special Winter Olympic dispute resolution process and six month contracting out notice.

However, the two other striking CUPE locals failed to ratify the recommendations presented to them after their local leaderships called for rejection of the contracts. Eighteen hundred workers organized in CUPE Local 1004, which oversees two separate contracts, one for water, sewage, street repairs and garbage collection and the other for Parks and Recreation were advised by their union leadership to vote down the contract. Local by-laws require that contracts must be ratified by at least a two-thirds majority of voting members. Only 58 per cent of parks workers and 57 per cent of outside city workers voted in favour of the mediator's recommendations. Workers were unimpressed by mediator recommendations that provided for wage raises and special Winter Olympic considerations that were less than that agreed to in other jurisdictions.

Eight hundred library workers organized in CUPE Local 391 were also advised by the union leadership to vote down a contract that provided for larger wage increases for 300 members and less for the other 500. Members were adamant that their pay equity demands could not be used to penalize higher paid workers as the mediator had proposed. As a result, the contract was voted down.

With the strike by two of the three CUPE locals continuing, efforts are being made to ensure that

members of the inside workers local do not cross picket lines in facilities where both inside and outside workers are both domiciled. Already, the city council is seeking Labour Board sanctions against attempts to place picket lines in areas where Local 15 members work.



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