

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 October 2007

## Latin America

### Mexico: Twenty-one workers die in oil platform collision

Twenty-one workers died when the oil platform on which they were working collided with an undersea oil well. The platform had been pushed by very strong winds. The Mexican state-owned oil company has yet to report on the cause of death. Surviving workers indicated that the workers died while abandoning the oil platform in lifeboats. TV images showed what was left of a destroyed lifeboat in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Usumacinta oil platform was operating in the Gulf of Mexico with a crew of 86 workers and 5 marines.

Immediately after the accident, doubts were raised about the sea-worthiness of the lifeboats. Several federal legislators demanded an investigation into the links between Marta Sahagún, wife of former president Vicente Fox, and Oceanografía, the firm that provided the boats to Pemex.

In Veracruz, outraged workers brought down a recently erected statue of Fox, who is being investigated in connection with illegal enrichment while in office.

### Twenty reporters killed this year in Latin America

On October 18, Honduran reporter Carlos Salgado was assassinated. Salgado worked for the Cadena radio station in Tegucigalpa. He was the 20th reporter killed in Latin America this year. Also threatened with death were two other radio reporters, Geovanny García and Martín Ramírez. Salgado's death may be related to a dispute with President Manuel Zelaya Rosales, who has accused the media of not reporting on government successes.

According to a report by a commission investigating the deaths, titled "Attacks on Reporters," 20 reporters have been killed so far this year, 17 were assassinated and 3 were killed in a fire in México.

### Argentine court rules workers must relinquish

### control of Zanon plant in one year

Argentine workers in the Patagonian Province of Neuquén will have to give up control of a plant that they occupied in 2001 and have been operating ever since. An Argentine court ruled that the workers must give up the plant by the end of 2008. Previous rulings had given the workers permission to continue operating the plant in 2009. The Zanon plant produces floor tiles.

The occupation of the plant was part of a wave of de facto expropriations of plants by workers in response to Argentina's recent economic crisis. Zanon workers defended their plant successfully against several attempts to expel them.

Though they argued successfully that Zanon's owner, Luis Zanon, had been paid in full for the plant by government subsidies under the government of President Carlos Ménem, the workers never obtained full legal rights to the factory.

Last week's court decision was a result of a petition by Italian creditor SACMI for payment for machinery supplied to Mr. Zanon prior to the occupation. SACMI is demanding that the plant be closed and auctioned off to pay for the machines.

## United States

### Workers in six states strike Navistar truck maker

More than 4,000 workers in six states struck October 23 against International Truck and Engine (ITE), the Chicago-based manufacturer of Navistar trucks, over unfair labor practices. The United Auto Workers (UAW), which represents ITE workers at 11 separate locals, charged in a press release that the company had violated labor law by "making unilateral changes in the terms and conditions of employment, ordering an illegal lockout at the company's assembly plant in Springfield, Ohio, and refusing to provide the UAW bargaining team with information necessary for negotiations."

The lockout occurred at ITE's Springfield, Ohio, assembly plant. ITE issued a statement back in

September that it would transfer production from Springfield to two nonunion plants in Texas and Mexico. The UAW says that move violated provisions in their contract.

While there are few details concerning the negotiations, Navistar spokesman Ron Wiley said of the impasse, “The main point is that we need improved competitiveness at our union-represented facilities.” The previous contract between the UAW and ITE expired on October 1.

### **California strike by sheet metal workers concluded**

The 270 workers at the Simpson Strong-Tie plant in Stockton, California, ended their weeklong strike October 17 after reaching an agreement with the world’s largest manufacturer of wood-to-wood and wood-to-concrete metal construction connectors. No details were made available about the settlement, but the strike was provoked over wages and health insurance.

Members of Sheet Metal Workers Local 162 launched their strike following a lopsided 220-2 rejection of the company’s previous offer. Union business manager Sal Rotolo told the *Stockton Record*, “These employers come from the Bay Area and think they can pay significantly lower. We don’t think the cost of living here in the Valley is significantly different from the Bay.”

Skilled workers such as welders only make \$17 an hour at Simpson’s Stockton plant while Bay Area welders make \$24-\$28 an hour. The lesser-skilled workers at Simpson make a mere \$9.00 to \$13.69 an hour. Simpson’s 21 tool-and-die makers, members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), honored picket lines during the strike.

### **Lawsuit filed by strike sympathizers terminated at Kentucky hospital**

Two recreational therapists who lost their jobs at the Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) Psychiatric Center in Hazard, Kentucky, have filed a lawsuit charging management with victimizing them for bringing sodas and snacks to striking nurses on the picket line back on October 1. Cynthia Boggs and Amber Tye say when they returned to work after dropping off food they purchased for picketing nurses, they were called into a meeting by management and told they had violated a directive prohibiting employees

from fraternizing with strikers. They were then suspended for not clocking out.

The lawsuit notes that clocking out is not required for employees who stay within one mile of ARH’s facility. On October 11, ARH informed the two workers they had been terminated. In response, their lawyer stated in a press release, “It is pretty clear that Cynthia and Amber got caught in the middle between ARH and the union and were fired to send a message to other employees.”

Some 650 members of the Nurses Association walked off the job at nine ARH facilities in West Virginia and Kentucky October 1 protesting mandatory overtime and other issues that they believe undermines patient care. The company’s final offer before nurses walked out called for 10- and 12-hour shifts.



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