

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 November 2007

Latin America

Mexico City: Academic secondary school employees on third week of strike

The strike at 20 academic high schools in Mexico City is entering its third week. Romualdo Escudero Carrillo, secretary of the Independent Union of Education Workers in Academic Secondary Schools (SINTCB), indicated last week that negotiations were stalled. This week mediators from the Labor Ministry will participate in the talks. The SINTCB represents teaching and non-teaching school employees who provide services to 120,000 students.

The school employees are demanding that the schools implement wage decisions made by the Mexico City legislature in 2004. Escudero pointed out that in 2005 and 2006 school employees received no increases in their base salary, only one-time bonuses. The SINTCB calculates that wages are 45 percent less than they should be had the 2004 salary adjustment been implemented.

Mexican copper miners' strike continues

Mexican transnational corporation Grupo México continues to demand that Mexican courts force workers at the Cananea copper mine to end their five-month-long strike. If no decision is made before December 15, Mexican courts will adjourn for the year.

Miners at the Cananea mine, one of the largest open pit mines in the world, located near the border between the Mexican state of Sonora and the US state of Arizona, are on strike over wages and health and safety. The local union representing the miners, which is part of the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union, supports exiled former mine union President Napoleón Gómez.

In the wake of the Pasta de Concho mine disaster, which killed 65 miners, former Mexican president Vicente Fox summarily removed Gómez in 2006. Gómez then fled the country to avoid corruption charges and now resides in Canada. The union is split

between pro- and anti-Gómez factions. In some mines, workers have begun to abandon the union in disgust over this factional dispute.

A spokesperson for Grupo México said last week that the company expects a court ruling in the first two weeks of December. Were the courts to rule in favor of the company, it would then be authorized to replace strikers at Cananea and two other mines.

Mass protests in Peru against Garcia government's economic policies

Eight thousand workers and students marched in Lima and thousands more protested in Arequipa and Cuzco last Thursday against the economic policies of President Alan García. The trade union federation CGTP organized this protest. In Lima the protesters included government employees, teachers, striking miners, students and many others.

The demonstrators carried signs and chanted slogans demanding an end to layoffs, jobs for all and a rejection of a free trade treaty with the United States, which, they chanted, will "bring misery and tuberculosis" to Peru. The US House of Representatives approved the treaty the same day as the march.

Union ends national miners strike in Peru

The National Federation of Mine, Metal and Steel Workers (FNTMMS) suspended a national strike on Friday, November 9. The strike, which began four days earlier, was declared illegal by the government of President Alan García.

State officials say the strike failed because miners largely ignored the strike call by the union. An FNTMMS spokesperson did not contradict the claim and said that the union had taken a strategic decision to protect workers. He added that the union had abandoned the idea of another national strike in favor of short regional strikes.

The union is demanding more full-time jobs and the removal of a cap on profit sharing bonuses. Those bonuses are now limited to 18 months' pay.

Chile: Gold and silver miners to strike this week

Miners at the El Peñón gold and silver mine in northern Chile are set to strike this week. The main issues are wages and working conditions. According to Guillermo Grancke, leader of the El Peñón miners union, management had asked the government to mediate the strike. Miners have been working without a contract since November 7.

El Peñón, located in Chile's Atacama desert, is expected to produce 230,000 ounces of gold and 8.8 million ounces of silver this year. Yamana Gold Inc., a Canadian firm, owns the mine, through its subsidiary Meridian Gold.

United States

Alabama aluminum strike: Steelworkers return while other unions stay out

United Steelworkers (USW) Local 200 members narrowly ratified a new contract November 8 at the Wise Alloys aluminum plant in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Some 330 USW workers walked out on strike November 2, but the agreement pushed by the union bureaucracy was narrowly approved by a 56-44 margin. The settlement left striking members of the North Alabama Building and Construction Trades Council isolated on the picket line. No details about the five-year agreement with the USW have been made public.

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers representative Charles Lamon, who represents a section of those 200 workers left on the picket line, defended the USW bureaucracy's breaking ranks. "We let them handle their workers and we worry about our workers," he told the *Times Daily*. But rank-and-file members of the building trades felt differently. Steve Kirkland, who is still walking the picket line, told WAFF-TV, "I feel like they got tricked, that some of our steel brothers and sisters, their business agent kind of tricked them."

Another 105 members of the Operating Engineers walked off the job November 5, but union negotiators quickly obtained a tentative agreement later that day. Eight members of the Carpenters union have also ended picketing. Wise Alloys is the third leading US producer of aluminum can stock for the beverage and food industries.

Northern Virginia janitors strike against victimization during union drive

Over 75 janitors in Northern Virginia walked off the

job November 7 after management for the cleaning contractor Red Coats Inc. fired four workers for union activity. Janitors for Red Coats, who earn as little as \$6 an hour, were joined by janitors for ABM Janitorial Services, who bottom out at \$6.75 an hour. They are also seeking union representation.

The Service Employees International Union, which launched an organizing drive in Northern Virginia last June, alleges that Red Coats interrogated the four workers and then discharged them for participating in legal union activity. Among the retailers who operate out of buildings in Arlington, Virginia cleaned by these janitors are Tiffany's and Gucci.

Canada

British Columbia carpenters break International ties

After a long campaign steeped in the nationalist rhetoric of the trade union bureaucracy, 5,000 carpenters, members of the Construction, Maintenance and Allied Workers Union, voted by 76 percent to sever all organizational ties with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ) based in the US state of Washington. The union also represents shipyard workers in British Columbia's lower mainland as well as school board workers in the province's interior. The union is affiliated to the 150,000-strong Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada.

The re-organized union will be required to pay the UBCJ \$8 million in compensation to consolidate the split. The Washington-based union still maintains the right to attempt to organize in British Columbia. In Canada it is not uncommon for building trades to battle each other over parochial jurisdictions, splitting workers not only over national but even provincial borders.



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