

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 November 2007

## Latin America

### Strike continues against Mexico City secondary schools

Education workers continue to strike against academic high schools in Mexico City. Ongoing negotiations with the Bureau of Public Education (SEP) have stalled over the SEP's insistence that job categories and wage differentials be pared down.

Romualdo Escodero, who heads the National Union of Academic School Employees (SINTCB), indicated to the Mexican news agency Notimex that the union would resist the bureau's demands. “[Negotiations] will only go forward if the Bureau of Public Education shows interest and flexibility,” declared Escodero. “We will not accept any changes in our collective job contract, or that there be a change in job descriptions.”

The strike began on November 1 and involves 20 schools and 120,000 pupils.

### Report indicates Mexican copper miners face unhealthful conditions

Cananea miners, on strike since July 30, are exposed to noxious conditions, according to a new study by the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network (MHSSN), a US group. The study was commissioned by Section 65 of the National Miners and Metal Workers Union (SNTMM), which represents 1,200 striking workers.

The study was conducted by lung and industrial hygiene experts and physicians from the US and Mexico. They visited the mine and examined 68 of the miners. The report found evidence of a serious lack of preventive maintenance, equipment repair and failure to correct obvious health hazards. As a result, workers are routinely exposed to very high levels of toxic dust and acid mists.

Health and safety have become an important issue in the strike. Union officials are insisting on a thorough cleanup of the mine as one of the conditions for ending the strike. Cananea is one of Mexico's largest open-pit copper mines.

### Mexican union signs secret pact with Social Security

## Institute

mA letter published in the Mexican political weekly *Proceso* charges that Mexico's Social Security Institute (IMSS), the agency charged with public health and retirement services, signed a secret pact with the union representing IMSS employees that clears the way for the privatization of the system, including the replacement of the public employees' pension plan with private savings accounts for the workers.

Javier Lozano, secretary of Mexico's Labor and Social Benefits Bureau, described the pact as “requiring that new generations of IMSS employees take over the cost of their own retirement.” The pact also paves the way for increasing the number of working years required to achieve retirement. This change, claimed Lozano, is in accordance with prevailing conditions .

Pensions and health services were privatized for the private sector in the 1990s during the administration of Ernesto Zedillo, but left intact for public employees.

IMSS employees were unaware of the existence of this pact between their union and Labor Bureau officials. Both Lozano and IMSS union officials refuse to make this document public. The letter was signed by Bertha Elena Luján and Dr. Asa Cristina Laurell, labor and health secretaries of the so-called “legitimate government of Mexico,” an organization linked to the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática—Party of the Democratic Revolution).

### Airport employees strike in Santa Cruz, Bolivia

Employees of Bolivia's largest airport in the city of Santa Cruz, the Viru Viru airport, walked off their jobs on November 13. Thei r one-day strike was followed by a similar job action by transport workers. The strikers are demanding back pay. Their paychecks were held up when the government of President Evo Morales froze the bank accounts of Viru Viru management, accusing it of corruption involving cash payments from airline companies and other irregularities. At one point last month, the Bolivian Air Force occupied the facility.

Airport workers accused the government of refusing to

come up with a solution and of having no resources to feed and attend to their families' needs.

President Morales accused the strikers of having a political agenda. The Bolivian government recently accused business interests of conspiring with the US government and the Spanish Popular Party to de-stabilize his government and organize a right-wing coup.

### **United States**

#### **Pennsylvania teachers end strike without a contract**

Teachers of the Seneca Valley school district, north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, ended their five-week strike last week without an agreement. The 575 teachers have been seeking a 6 percent raise as opposed to the 4 percent offered by the district. Teachers are especially bitter over a threat back in August by the school district's chief negotiator, Tom King, to reduce its wage proposal by \$43,019.45 for every day that teachers strike.

The union is struggling under a legal straitjacket imposed by Pennsylvania state law that demands they curtail their strike action to permit 180 days of classroom teaching by June 30. The next step is mandatory nonbinding arbitration, which can drag on for weeks or months without any requirement for the district to settle. Failure to conclude an agreement could spill over into the next school year, resulting in another indecisive strike. Currently, 55 teacher contracts are unresolved in Pennsylvania, including one that dates back to 2004.

#### **Field workers strike Michigan gas company**

Some 45 workers began picketing at SEMPCO Energy offices in Holland, Three Rivers and Niles, Michigan, on November 12 after the gas company declined to extend healthcare and other benefits in the last year of a new proposed three-year contract. The strikers, members of United Steelworkers Local 16201, have been without a contract since last June; they perform emergency gas shutoff services and locate underground gas lines for construction and excavation projects.

SEMPCO has some 280,000 customers across Michigan. Last week, the private equity firm Cap Rock Holdings, based in Midland, Texas, acquired SEMPCO.

### **Canada**

#### **British Columbia woodworkers ratify pact**

About 500 striking sawmill workers, members of the United Steelworkers (USW), ended a four-month strike last week by narrowly ratifying a three-year contract with International Forest Products (Interfor). Only 52 percent of the voting membership accepted the deal that raised basic hourly pay from C\$23.26 to C\$24.92 and included language on severance pay in case of partial closure of

any of Interfor's three Lower Mainland or Fraser Valley sawmills.

Workers, however, had struck largely over the issue of safety and the right to maintain shift schedules. In an industry as dangerous as this, increases in shift duration or untoward scheduling changes have been directly attributable to on-the-job injury. The new contract allows the company to adjust shifts with minimal oversight.

The contract is virtually identical to one recently signed by some 5,000 USW members with the larger Forest Industrial Relations (FIR), the bargaining entity for a polyglot of woodworking operations on Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlottes and the Lower Mainland. In that instance, workers who had been on strike since July voted by only 51 percent to ratify a contract after a bitter struggle.

During the ratification meetings in local union halls up and down the British Columbia coast, workers denounced the USW leadership for abandoning their personal safety to bolster company profits. The FIR contract was actually turned down by a large majority of the locals involved. However, votes from the largest local, held in abeyance until all other locals had voted, just managed to turn the tide.

Officials of the union, however, refused to acknowledge worker dissatisfaction with their leadership. Forced to recognize the razor-thin ratification majorities, USW officials rejected any criticism and pronounced on their web site that "the close vote again signals companies need to work more closely with the workforce."



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