

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 December 2007

## Latin America

### Argentine farm workers denounce Manpower Inc.

Berry pickers in northwest Argentina protested last week that they have not been paid and that the transnational labor services contractor, Manpower, has ignored a three-month contract it had signed with them.

The workers, contracted by Manpower to work in various farms in Tucuman province, have been given conflicting information on when they will be paid. Some were told that they would get paid this week, others were told to come back in January. Complaining workers cited other instances in which workers were exploited and cheated by Manpower.

When Manpower hired the workers it made them sign three-month contracts, but the workers have never seen a copy of those contracts. The fine print of the agreement gives the company the option not to provide work after one month.

One of the workers, Marta Iramaín, told the press agency Argenpress: “They do not call us back and we have to wait several days to get paid. Out of the 43 pesos a day that they promised, we get 39, after discounts for travel and social security.” Many workers suspect that the discounted funds never make their way to the social security system. One worker described how her family health benefits had been delayed. The company claimed that the paperwork had been lost.

In a separate case, three farm workers accused the company of deception and abuse for moving them to another province, Córdoba, and housing them in a metal barn with no beds. They had to sleep on the floor, surrounded by refuse and rodents.

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin-based transnational, the world’s biggest provider of temporary labor, is the 136th largest US corporation and operates in 73 countries.

### Mexican Judge rules that copper workers strike may continue

A Mexican court determined on December 14 that the

four-month strike by 1,200 miners employed by the transnational Grupo México at the Cananea Copper Mine in Sonora state, is legal and may continue. The strike began on July 30 over safety conditions and against government intervention in the Mexican Miners and Metalworkers Union (MMMU).

The ruling was a result of the union’s appeal of a determination by the Mexican Labor Ministry that the strike was illegal. Had the Labor Ministry’s order been sustained, Grupo México would have been allowed to fire the strikers.

Lawyers for Grupo México had argued that despite the union’s claims on health, sanitation and safety in the mine, the real reason for the strike was an attempt to force the government of Enrique Calderón to reinstate Napoleón Gómez as head of the MMMU. Gómez fled to Canada last year to avoid arrest for corruption. He had been summarily and undemocratically dismissed from union leadership by then President Vicente Fox in the wake of an explosion last year at a coalmine, also owned by Grupo México, which had buried 65 miners alive. Their bodies have yet to be recovered.

Cananea miners say that large piles of mineral dust plus disconnected ventilation fans put their health at risk.

### Peruvian miners demand President García abolish Fujimori-era laws

On Tuesday December 11, Peruvian miners union petitioned Peruvian President Alan García to abolish or reform repressive anti-labor legislation associated with the regime of Alberto Fujimori.

Among the laws mentioned by the miners’ union are the elimination of early retirement for miners, the cut in piecework rates, and legislation that allows mining companies to hire workers in other countries.

The miners’ union has threatened to strike over these issues.

The general secretary of the National Peruvian Federation of Miners and Steel and Metal Workers,

Julio Ortiz, denounced a wave of abuses of miners' rights and indicated that unless the government resolves this and other conflicts in the mining industry, there will be a national miners' strike in 2008. "We will have a plenary assembly in mid-January that will represent the rank and file in large, medium and small mines," he said. "At that time we will set a date of this strike."

## **United States**

### **California nurses strike Sutter hospital chain**

Nurses at 13 hospitals in the San Francisco Bay Area walked off the job December 13 to press for better contract terms against the giant Sutter Health chain. The nurses are opposing management's drive to impose higher health care premium costs and want to boost staffing levels as well as raise wages.

The strike was scheduled by the California Nurses Association to end Saturday, but many hospitals were expected to lock out nurses until December 17 under the pretense of honoring contracts signed with companies providing temporary replacement workers to fill in for strikers.

Nurses complain that low staffing levels bar them from taking breaks, thereby endangering patient safety. Nurses also want new work rules that protect them from injuries as a result of having to lift patients.

Thorild Urdal, a 23-year veteran nurse at Alta Bates Summit hospital's labor-and-delivery unit, told the *Argus* that because she has been compelled to skip so many breaks during the last 10 months the hospital has paid her \$6,000 in penalties. "I don't want the money. I want a break so I can be refreshed, so my patients can get the best care. If I have to work all night without getting a drink of water or a quick snack, my patients aren't getting what they deserve."

### **Management at struck Appalachian hospitals refuse cooling-off period**

Management at the nine Appalachian Regional Hospitals (ARH) in West Virginia and Kentucky refused to allow striking nurses to return to work December 10 after a plan was floated by governors of the affected states to end the two-month walkout. The leadership of the Nurses Association, which represents the 650 striking ARH nurses, unanimously agreed to a proposal by Kentucky Governor-elect Steve Beshear and West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin to return to work without a contract for 90 days while negotiations

restart.

But ARH management refused to go along with the proposal. Rocco Massey, CEO of the Beckley-ARH Community, told the *Register-Herald*, "We already have new [replacement] nurses working under the new contract, and they are very happy with it. We can't operate under two contracts at the same time.

## **Canada**

### **Alberta Safeway workers vote to strike**

Workers at one of the largest supermarket chains in western Canada voted overwhelmingly to go on strike after talks with their union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), broke down over wages.

Over 7,000 workers are employed by Canada Safeway Limited in over 80 stores across Alberta. Fifteen years ago the workers made large wage concessions to the company on the basis of a hollow promise by management that they would be rewarded once the company returned to profitability. While the workers had to pressure their union to take this strike vote, union leaders are pledging that no strike will take place until next year. Talks are set to resume in mid-January.



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