

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 January 2008

## Mexican construction workers expelled from US

About 100 Mexican construction workers that had been hired by JNS Construction Services, a Colorado-based construction firm, were sent back to their country because of lack of work. The workers, who had entered the US legally with temporary H-2B visas this October, were abandoned by their employer with no money to return to their homes.

The Spanish news agency EFE quoted Adriana Valdéz, a spokeswoman for the Denver Mexican Consulate. Ms. Valdéz indicated that the workers had been brought over to build a housing tract in the mountain community of Avon. Upon arriving, the workers were informed that there was no work for them.

JNS offered the workers a bus ride back to the border, but no assistance beyond that. Those that refused the ride were told that their visas would be cancelled. The workers then turned to the Catholic Charities Office in Glenwood Springs, California.

## Enraged families attack Peruvian building boss

On December 28, family members of eight construction workers, who died when an enormous concrete wall fell on them on December 12, attacked project owner Gerardo Mamani Oscco as he left a police precinct under arrest. The enraged family members kicked and punched Mamani Oscco before police officers intervened.

The collapse occurred in the city of La Victoria, an eastern suburb of Lima.

Nine workers were buried alive in the incident. One worker survived but lost an arm. Three homes were badly damaged as a result the collapse. Delays in the arrival of a rescue crane were a factor in the deaths. Richard Nina Paucará, the sole survivor, was the first one out, rescued a full 12 hours after the collapse.

The dead workers were César Parichahua Vargas, Juan Carlos Rodas Lidia, Mario Enrique Zapata Atoche, Luis Poma Díaz, Víctor Díaz Vilcashuamán, Emerson Uñango Huamán, Juan Soís and Carlos Alberto Santiago Canche.

In the wake of the collapse, municipal authorities charged Mamani Oscco and his contractor JAA Construcciones with having a forged construction permit and labor law violations. Both men also face manslaughter charges.

A report in the December 29 edition of the Peruvian daily *Crónica Viva* points out that a preliminary investigation has found that shady practices that include little or no oversight and illegal permits are ubiquitous in Lima and its suburbs.

Metropolitan Lima is going through a construction boom and a bonanza of deregulation legislation, including a recently approved national building law that prevents municipalities from regulating construction and that automatically approves the construction of five-story buildings with no engineering reports.

It is not clear if there was an engineering report in the La Victoria building, which was to have 10 stories and three underground floors.

Mario Huamán, secretary of the Civil Construction Union, was interviewed by the Andina news agency. He said that 550 construction workers have been killed since 1997 and 36 have been killed this year.

## Argentine garlic workers clash with packing company

A month-long dispute at the Campo Grande packing plant in Mendoza province escalated last week. The workers, mostly women, are demanding an end to off-the-books work and formal employment that includes government-mandated benefits.

A protest last month by 120 Campo Grande workers was repressed by the police. Fifty workers were injured. Despite attempts by government authorities to broker a compromise, the day after Christmas management fired and blacklisted 33 workers. The list was distributed to other packing plants in the region as a “warning” to potential employers.

In response, last Thursday 400 workers barricaded a major highway. A report in *Los Andes*, a Mendoza daily, reports that Christian Basin, a catholic priest that defends the workers, has received death threats.

## Uruguayan air traffic controllers union cancels strike

On December 26 the Uruguayan Defense and Labor ministries decreed that services provided by air traffic controllers were “essential.” The move by the Social Democratic government of President Tabares was a transparent effort to block strike action by the air controllers.

After perfunctory protests by Fernando Reyes, leader of the Uruguayan Association of Air Transportation, the union called off the strike that was to begin on Friday, December 28. Reyes accused the government of ignoring rules set by the International Labor Organization and called upon it to “demilitarize” civil aviation, currently run by the Uruguayan Air Force.

## International reps negotiate contract behind back of Ohio strikers

Top labor bureaucrats for the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Workers (GMP) went over the heads of local officials to negotiate an agreement in the three-month strike by 160 workers at the OPW Fueling Components plant in Ohio’s West Chester Township. Jim Miller, shop chairman for Local 45B, told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, “It’s not good.”

According to Miller, the agreement reached by his union’s international representatives would only provide for the return of 30 striking workers. He indicated that without any assurances for a return to work, strikers would not vote on the tentative agreement.

The intervention of the GMP bureaucracy came after a

December 13 hearing officer for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services rejected the local union's claim for unemployment benefits once the OPW strike turned into a lockout. The union had based its appeal to the state on the fact that the company had failed to make a new contract proposal back in November.

#### **Talks break off in Pennsylvania machinists strike**

Union and company negotiators met for three hours December 26 in a failed effort to end the nearly two-month strike by machinists at Philadelphia Mixing Solutions in Palmyra, Pennsylvania. Business agent Tom Santone of the International Association of Machinists Local 2367, which represents the 14 striking workers, declared "no progress" had been made and that, "The language they have put on the table we'll just never agree to."

Philadelphia Mixing Solutions has put forward a one-year contract that would cut wages \$2.80 an hour, increase insurance costs by \$2 an hour and freeze pensions. According to management, their new offer would put average wages at \$22 an hour. The two sides are expected to return to the bargaining table this week.

The previous eight-year agreement covering workers at Philadelphia Mixing Solutions expired November 4. The company manufactures mixing and aerating machines for chemical processing, wastewater treatment, tank storage, and other fluid mixing applications.

#### **Striking Kentucky truck drivers decertify Teamsters**

The National Labor Relations Board announced December 28 that workers involved in an eight-month strike against TS Trucking voted 61-23 to decertify the Teamsters Union. The workers, who operate dump trucks for TS Trucking, joined Teamsters Local 89 in June 2006 seeking to better wages and working conditions.

When workers struck back in May 2007 they were making \$10.25 to \$11 an hour. They had experienced multiple cuts in wages over the previous decade while health care and living costs increased. They were seeking a new contract that would set wages at \$12.75 an hour this year and \$13.00 an hour in 2008.

#### **Redco workers rally as strike nears two months**

Workers at the Redco Foods plant in Little Falls, New York rallied December 20 as the strike by 50 members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union Local 50 nears the two-month mark with no end in sight. Workers have drawn the line against the company's demand that employees contribute 25 percent of medical premiums, the elimination of defined pensions for new hires, implementation of an inferior 401(k) retirement savings plan and the slashing of vacations.

There is considerable opposition to an agreement that denies pensions to new hires. Striker Anita Spraker told WKTV-Utica, "The people ahead of us took care of us. And we want to take care of the ones coming in, because they're our children that are going to work there now."

But the policy of the AFL-CIO has been to isolate the strike and appeal for government intervention. Joyce Alston, president of Local 50, told the *Evening Times*, "We will exhaust every legal

option we can until they begin to budge. We try any way possible to get some influence from local politicians, media outlets and other efficient ways to get through to the company by the show of support we have."

#### **Québec firefighters take job action**

Fire stations in the Gatineau region north of Ottawa were closed for long periods over the holiday season as a result of a dispute between the Gatineau firefighters association and management over holiday staffing. One station in Hull, Québec was closed Christmas day and another in a neighboring region shut down for 14 hours on Christmas Eve. There was no apparent impact on firefighting services.

The disruption took place amid strained contract talks with the current agreement set to expire on December 31. The union cites an auditor's report which identified excessive overtime worked by senior firefighters, an issue which union leaders say management has been reluctant to address.

#### **New Brunswick University locks out faculty**

St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, locked out teaching staff last Friday after 10 months of fruitless contract talks, marking the first time a Canadian University has taken such action before a strike was called.

The lockout comes after faculty rejected the administration's latest offer but before a strike vote. Members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which represents teaching staff at the school, expressed dismay over the extreme action at the Catholic university, particularly as it was taken during the Christmas season.

Main issues in the dispute include salaries, increased workloads, job security and benefits. The faculty has been without a contract since June and no negotiations are currently scheduled.



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