

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 January 2008

## Latin America

### **Mexican troops used to crush copper workers strike**

On January 12, nearly 1,000 police and military personnel were sent against 300 strikers who were guarding the three gates at the Cananea mine in Sonora state, where 1,300 copper miners have been on strike since last July. The security forces attacked the strikers with tear gas and expelled the pickets from the mine. The National Union of Miners and Metal Workers (SNTMM) indicated that 40 miners were injured and five remain missing.

On January 10, Mexico's Labor Ministry's Conciliation and Mediation Agency declared the strike illegal. The owner of the mine, Grupo México, then offered returning miners a 15,000 peso bonus (less than US\$1,500) if they returned to work within 72 hours..

The walkout began July 30, 2007 and also involved the silver mine at Taxco and the Sombrerete smelter in Zacatecas. Strikers demanded better health and safety conditions and the reinstatement of SNTMM President Napolón Gómez Urrutia. Gómez was removed by former President Vicente Fox, who accused him of corruption, and now resides in Canada.

President Fox took advantage of anger by miners against the Gómez bureaucracy to expel him as a union leader in the wake of the February 2006 disaster at the Pasta de Concho mine, where 65 coal miners were buried alive and killed.

### **Wildcat strike by Argentine airline workers**

International flights in Buenos Aires by Aerolíneas Argentinas were cancelled on Saturday following a wildcat strike sparked by an altercation between a passenger and a ticket agent. The incident also led to passenger protests. Chanting, "We want to travel," dozens of passengers attacked Aerolíneas counters in the airport, destroying computer equipment and office furniture.

## United States

### **Strike deadline for Amtrak workers**

Negotiations between Amtrak and nine unions are scheduled this week as the national passenger railroad faces a possible walkout as early as January 30 unless it reaches an agreement with the unions or Congress intervenes.

More than 10,000 Amtrak employees have been working without new contracts and wage increases since 2000. There has never been a national strike at the railway and both Amtrak and union officials say they don't believe one will occur now. Under the Railway Labor Act, the workers could not strike until federal officials determined that mediation had been unsuccessful. Even then Congress could still intervene to prevent a strike and impose terms.

Nevertheless the agencies that run metropolitan transit systems in New York City and other cities around the country are working out contingency plans in the event of an Amtrak strike.

### **UFCW and Kroger avert strike in Cincinnati region**

The United Food and Commercial Workers union reached a tentative agreement with Kroger Co. in order to prevent a strike by 11,000 workers at 79 stores in the Cincinnati, Ohio region. Kroger, the nation's largest traditional grocer, hasn't had a strike in its hometown since 1971.

The tentative contract must be approved by the union's membership, and voting could begin this week. Workers authorized the UFCW to call a strike last month but the union ordered its members to continue working under a contract extension scheduled to end January 10. For its part, Kroger had said it would use managers and temporary workers to keep operating the affected stores in southwest Ohio, northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana.

The union claims it achieved a new three-year contract with pay increases and no benefit concessions. However, the union has long collaborated with the

supermarket chains in reducing wages and expanding the use of part-time workers.

### **Two industrial accidents at former Ford Rouge steel mill**

An executive for Dearborn, Michigan's Severstal steel plant declared, "Our operations are safe," after two industrial accidents hit the plant during a one-week period.

On January 11, a 39-year-old worker fell 25 feet to his death while performing maintenance in a raw materials handling room. A week earlier, the foundry's oldest blast furnace exploded after a buildup of gasses from a steelmaking process ignited and threw the building's cement blocks as far as 100 yards. A contract worker driving past the building suffered serious burns that are believed will cause disfigurement. Severstal vice president Mel Baggett denied there were any safety issues in the complex. "We wouldn't put our employees in facilities that were unsafe," he said.

An investigator for the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration went to the site to look into the January 11 death the day of the accident. It is the 17th time the state agency has had to visit the foundry since 2004 when the Russian company OAO Severstal took over the former Ford Rouge steel plant.

### **Canada**

#### **Montreal transit drivers protest stalled negotiations**

Bus and subway (metro) drivers in Montreal are protesting against the state of contract talks and in preparation for a possible strike, which could take place as early as next month.

Drivers in Québec's largest city have been without a contract for over a year. The union is ordering largely token protests—such as drivers not wearing their uniforms—after the executive voted to step up pressure for a new contract. A deal was reached last month but was vetoed by Mayor Gérald Tremblay. Drivers have been seeking wage increases that would put them on par with Montreal firefighters and police, but the city is insisting on a one-year wage freeze.

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