# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**5 February 2008**

**Latin America**

**Venezuela: Steel workers launch protest strike**

More than 14,000 steel workers employed by Ternium-Sidor, Venezuela's largest steel mill, carried out a 48-hour strike beginning shortly after midnight Thursday. The purpose of the strike was to pressure management on improvements in wages and working conditions. On Friday, union officials were discussing prolonging the strike because no agreement had been reached.

Management rejected a union demand of a 70 bolivar daily wage (€17.30, US$32.50) as totally unrealistic.

The Venezuelan labor ministry has proposed a 45 bolivar daily wage for the steel workers.

Termium-Sidor is a consortium of two transnational corporations. Mexico-based Ternium produces plate steel in Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela. Sidor (Siderúrgica Del Orinoco) is a formerly state-owned Venezuelan company that is now controlled by the Italo-Argentine Techint Group. The combined enterprise is the fourth largest steel producer in Latin America.

**Mexico: Strike at the University of Chapingo**

On Friday, professors and other academic employees of the Autonomous University of Chapingo walked off their jobs to press for a wage increase of 35 percent. The strikers are also protesting management violations of the existing contract. The strike began after workers rejected a university offer.

The University of Chapingo, located in the city of the same name—25 kilometers west of Mexico City—is one of Mexico's oldest and most prestigious. It contains the National School of Agriculture and the Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, institutions of international renown.

**Puerto Rican authorities to repress teachers' strike**

According to a report in the San Juan daily *Diario/La Prensa,* General David Carrión of Puerto Rico's National Guard met with National Police Chief Pedro Toledo to coordinate the government's strategy against the Puerto Rican teachers' union. The teachers were set to strike last Friday, but postponed the walkout until this coming Friday.

The Federation of Puerto Rican Teachers (FMPR) is the largest union on the island. It represents some 34,000 public school teachers. The union was decertified January 9 for carrying out a strike authorization vote—public employees are barred from striking in Puerto Rico. The union was told to cease representing teachers and that the government would no longer collect dues on its behalf. Teachers are required to pay US$16 a month in dues. The amount is collected by the Education Department. No one knows what will happen to the money that the union was supposed to receive this month, which adds up to US$512,000.

Initially, the dispute was over wages. Puerto Rican teachers' salaries start at $19,000, about one third less than what US teachers receive, even though many prices tend to be higher in Puerto Rico.

The administration of Governor Anibal Acevedo-Vilá now refuses to negotiate with the decertified FMPR and instead has made it clear that it intends to use force to keep the schools open and intimidate teachers into breaking ranks with the strikers. Acevedo-Vilá claims that most teachers will not strike. Union officials estimate that 23,000 teachers will observe the strike.

In this battle Puerto Rican authorities have found a US mainland ally, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), part of the Change to Win union coalition, represented by New York labor bureaucrat Dennis Rivera, who has announced his intention of shoving the FMPR aside and becoming the representative of the Puerto Rican public school teachers.

**United States**

**Workers strike Virginia truck plant**

Members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2069 walked off the job February 1 at the Volvo Trucks

North America plant in Dublin, Virginia, after contract talks failed to produce a new agreement covering the 2,900 workers. Four days earlier, workers had voted by a 95 percent margin to strike the company if an agreement was not reached by the January 31 deadline.

A letter signed by local president Lester Hancock charged the company with trying to "erode the wages and benefits." "Even worse," he said, "Volvo is seeking to dismantle many of the most basic health and safety protections found in our current agreement."

Last year, Volvo cut 900 of the then 3,170 jobs at the Dublin plant and then recalled 580 of those workers. Last December, Volvo again announced it would lay off 650 workers in February, but delayed the decision after the UAW struck the plant. Volvo spokesperson James McNamara told the *Roanoke Times*, "We're considering a variety of options to keep the plant running as close to full production as soon as possible," but did not provide details as to how they would try to break the strike. The Virginia plant manufactures all Volvo trucks sold in Canada, the United States and Mexico.

**Contracts expire at Minnesota clinics after strike threat**

The contract covering 1,500 healthcare workers at 29 HealthPartners clinics in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, expired February 1 with no new contract in place. A few days earlier, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 113, comprising nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, physicians assistants and other healthcare personnel, voted to strike the system of clinics if an acceptable agreement couldn't be reached.

Among the issues that rankled workers is the demand they pay part of the monthly premium for healthcare and higher co-payments on prescription drugs. Nancy Wickoren, a Licensed Practical Nurse speaking on behalf of the SEIU, said, "HealthPartners should be a role model for our whole community when it comes to collaborative efforts to provide quality, affordable healthcare—not slashing coverage and ignoring the voice of frontline caregivers."

The two sides have been working with a mediator, but should a new agreement not be reached, a short strike could be called after two days of negotiations.

**Canada**

**Occupation of Kitchener auto parts plant ends**

The occupation of a Kitchener, Ontario, plant of Ledco Ltd. has been called off, apparently at the behest of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union bureaucracy, with no concession on the part of the company to the workers' demands. The 65 workers (only 37 of whom are union members) occupied the plant in late January in a bid to win severance pay, barricading the building and parking lot on Strasburg Road on the outskirts of Kitchener. The company had filed for bankruptcy and indicated that it had no intention of fulfilling its severance pay obligations.

Although the CAW had previously said the occupation would continue until an agreement was reached giving the laid-off workers severance pay, the union's press release following the canceling of the occupation states: "The CAW continues to press key Ledco customers General Motors, Ford and Chrysler to recognize their responsibility for Ledco workers severance pay."