

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 March 2008

Latin America

Uruguay: Public school teachers strike

Elementary and secondary school teachers in Uruguay will strike on March 3, the first day of school in that nation. Among the issues at stake are salaries, benefits, working conditions, and seniority rights. The teachers decided on a strike at a meeting on Saturday, March 1, attended by 700 educators. The strike will involve students in the Departments of Montevideo and Canelones, where the majority of Uruguayans live.

In addition to the aforementioned issues, the teachers are demanding an increase in the education budget, improvements in retirement and a construction program to repair aging schools.

On Monday, teachers plan to rally at the Education Department and to march on the Economics and Finance Ministry in Montevideo. They will meet later on that day and vote on whether or not to continue the strike.

Peruvian miners end three-day strike

Miners employed by Buenaventura, Peru's biggest producer of precious metals, went on strike for three days last week. The walkout, which affected the Uchucchacua, Antapite, Orcopampa and Caraveli mines, ended on Friday.

The strikers were demanding that the company open its accounting books. Buenaventura claimed on February 28 that in 2007 it made \$274.8 million in profits, while in 2006 it earned \$428 million. The disclosure appears to have ended the walkout.

Roque Benavides, executive president of the company, denied that information was being kept from the workers, but said that information could not be released to them ahead of when it was released to shareholders. He accused the workers of having an ulterior, political motive for the strike.

Strike by Colombian nickel miners

Colombian nickel miners at the Cerromatoso mine, the biggest nickel mine in Colombia, have been on

strike since February 27. The workers, employed by the Anglo-Australian transnational firm BHP Billiton, are demanding that all workers who were hired on a temporary basis be given permanent contracts. The firm employs 3,500 miners, 1,000 of whom have permanent contracts. The other 2,500 miners are hired on a temporary basis; BHP Billiton considers them "subcontractors," allowing the company not to recognize basic labor rights for these workers.

Cerromatoso is located in the Department of Cordoba, on the Caribbean coast. It accounts for 4 percent of the world's nickel output. News of the strike caused a rapid increase in nickel prices. BHP Billiton is the world's largest mining company.

United States

Volvo truck strike in Virginia enters second month

More than 2,600 workers are continuing their strike at the Volvo truck manufacturing plant in Dublin, Virginia. Workers at the New River Valley truck plant, members of the United Auto Workers union (UAW) Local 2069, walked out on February 1 over healthcare, job security and working conditions. The strike began after Volvo sought even greater concessions than the UAW has granted other truck makers.

After a month without negotiations, it is expected that talks will soon resume. At the same time, Volvo President and CEO Per Carlsson released an employee memo to the media, which threatened that the company was exploring all options to resume full production without its unionized workforce.

Catholic teachers, students protest church refusal to recognize union

Teachers at Catholic schools in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, and Williamsport, Pennsylvania, held early morning pickets February 29 to protest the decision of the Scranton Diocese to bar them from organizing an independent union. Teachers were supported at noon the same day by a walkout of 200 students at Holy

Redeemer High School. Students who joined the protest have been given detention for the action.

Carrying signs with slogans such as “Practice What You Preach,” teachers are protesting a January 24 refusal to recognize the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers as a collective bargaining unit. Union president Michael Milz said the diocese also rejected a proposal to allow teachers to vote on the measure and declined to hold a meeting with teachers to discuss issues. Instead, the church will implement an employee relations program run by a consulting firm. A statement read, “This decision is final and will not be revoked, and the implementation of the employee relations program has begun.”

Teachers say they are overworked and underpaid. They fear that if they speak out individually they could face retaliation by the church. “I don’t have a voice. I’m invisible. To the system I’m invisible,” one teacher told Newswatch 16. This year, the diocese dictated a starting salary of \$23,000 for teachers, in contrast to the average \$34,000 paid public school teachers.

Rhode Island preparing to outlaw teachers’ strikes

Rhode Island’s Board of Regents for elementary and secondary education voted February 25 to submit proposals to Republican state governor Donald Carcieri that would impose heavy fines against striking teachers and make it illegal to carry out “work-to-rule” actions, whereby teachers perform an absolute minimum to meet their job requirements under contract.

Carcieri tasked the Regents to come up with proposals to further curb the rights of teachers following a wave of strikes last fall. After six meetings, the Regents outlined new proposals that would make strikes illegal. The definition of a strike would also be expanded to include any “concerted job action commonly referred to as ‘work to rule,’ including, without limitation, any stoppage of work, slowdown or curtailment of one or more customary teaching practices that are typically provided or performed by teachers in the absence of a strike.”

Besides banning strikes, the new proposal would also force teachers who do strike to pay a fine of two days’ pay for every day on strike. Currently, Rhode Island law does not ban or permit strikes. The suppression of teacher job actions was left to the courts, which would

impose restraining orders.

Canada

Windsor auto workers strike for first contract

About 170 workers at auto parts manufacturer TRW in Windsor, Ontario, members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), walked off the job last week in their battle to get a union. The strike, which continued into the weekend, forced the shutdown of a nearby Chrysler assembly plant that employs over 4,400 workers.

CAW negotiators say that the main obstacles to winning a first contract are wages and benefits, but it is clear that the union’s recent no-strike deal with auto parts giant Magna has given an incentive to its competitors to look for the same concessions from the union. Nevertheless, CAW head Buzz Hargrove, who brokered the Magna deal, claims his union is taking a tough stand in this struggle in anticipation of upcoming talks with US automakers for new national contracts.

The company has indicated it intends to continue production at the plant using management and other salaried staff, and no new talks are currently scheduled.



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