

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 March 2008

Latin America

Utility workers suspend strike in Mexico

Electrical utility workers called off a planned strike Sunday against “Luz y Fuerza del Centro” (LFC), the government-owned utility that provides electricity to the region surrounding México City that includes the states of Hidalgo, Morelia, Michoacán and part of Puebla.

The move came after LFC increased its wage offer to 4.25 percent plus a 2 percent travel allowance and an additional 2 percent contribution to a workers’ savings plan. In return, the Mexican Electricians Union (SME) agreed to changes in working conditions, long sought by the company, that, in the guise of labor flexibility and efficiency, will lead to speedups and layoffs.

Negotiations mediated by the Labor Department had ended on Friday night after the SME rejected an offer by LFC. About 22 million people live in the area served by the utility, which employs 40,000 SME members.

Initially, the SME had declared that its aim was to restore its members’ living standards to 1984 levels, which would mean the equivalent of a 16 percent wage hike plus a 4 percent increase in travel benefits. Management’s Friday offer was for a paltry 3 percent wage hike and a 1 percent increase in the travel allowance.

This betrayal of the workers’ demands takes place under conditions in which the government of President Felipe Calderón is pushing for the privatization of government-owned utilities such as LFC. Though SME leaders claim to oppose privatization, the new contract language makes the company more attractive to private investors.

Two are wounded in Venezuelan steel workers protest

Two workers were wounded by gunfire during a March 14 protest in Venezuela. The workers were shot during a protest over wages at the Ternuim-Sidor plant in southern Venezuela.

José Araicaigua, president of the Steel Workers Union (SUTISS,) declared that the National Guard had attacked the protesters with tear gas and shotguns. “I was wounded in my leg; one of our comrades has a wounded arm,” Araicaigua told the French press agency AFP.

The protesters were assaulted by police while they were marching down an avenue in Puerto Ordaz, 500 kilometers south of Caracas. The demonstration was part of an 80-hour strike that began last Wednesday. Workers are demanding that the company stop its delaying tactics in the negotiation of a new contract. Contract talks have gone on for 14 months.

The steel mill is one of the largest in Latin America, employing 12,000 workers. Last week, Ternium-Sidor offered a daily wage of US\$20.50 (44 bolivares). The union representing the strikers declared that it will not settle for less than US\$25.00 a day.

Franciso Rangel, governor of Bolivar state, defended the police action, stating that the protest was increasing traffic congestion.

United States

Workers at Gulf Coast yards launch lawsuit

Some 500 workers from India and the United Arab Emirates employed as welders and pipefitters at Gulf Coast oilrig yards have sued Signal International for forcing them to live in inhumane conditions and for threatening them in an attempt to keep them silent.

The workers were recruited in the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina as a cheap labor force to replace workers who were compelled to evacuate the area. Signal International lured the workers to Gulf Coast states by leading them to believe they would be given green cards and permanent resident status. Instead they were brought in only as guest workers and placed under guard in overcrowded bunkhouses. The lack of proper toilets and kitchens created unsanitary conditions, leading to sickness among some of the workers.

Last week, 120 workers at Signal International's facility in Mississippi walked out in protest over the conditions and picketed the office of a lawyer who recruited them. The *Hindustan Times* quoted 34-year-old Vijaka Kumaran of India, "The reason we gave up our homes to come here was to get permanent residency." Kumaran gathered all the money he could, including by selling his wife's jewelry, to pay the \$15,000 fee charged by Signal's labor agent.

The class-action lawsuit was filed in part by the Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Alabama. It charges recruiters and Signal International in "a broad scheme of psychological coercion, threats of serious harm and physical restraint, and threatened abuse of the legal process."

Strike ends at Virginia Volvo plant

Volvo announced Monday that the six-week strike at its New River Valley plant in Virginia had ended after the union agreed to a new contract. The company said workers would return to work on March 24.

About 2,600 workers organized in United Auto Workers Local 2069 went on strike February 1 against the Swedish truck maker after the union and Volvo failed to reach a new agreement on working conditions, wages and benefits.

While Volvo has not released details of the new three-year pact, company spokesman Marten Wilforss said the agreement did not alter plans announced in December to lay off up to 650 workers at the Virginia plant. Wikforss also said average daily truck production at the facility would be boosted from 100 to around 146 for a period to catch up for lost production.

Per Carlsson, president and CEO of Volvo Trucks North America, said the agreement would help improve competitiveness. Union officials were not immediately available for comment.

Unions brawl over representation at Ohio hospitals

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was confidentially preparing to add 8,300 dues-paying members at nine Ohio hospitals to their rolls, when the California Nurses Association (CNA) dispatched organizers to intervene in an effort to expand their franchise outside of the state of California. The CNA effort compelled the SEIU last week to cancel a union representation election at the nine hospitals run by the Catholic Healthcare Partners system.

SEIU President Andrew Stern charged the CNA campaign was "nothing more than a flimsy cover for out-and-out union-busting that we normally see from employers, not organizations that claim to care about workers." Rose Ann DeMoro, CNA executive director, countercharged that Stern entered into a sweetheart deal—"a rigged scam"—with hospital management under which the SEIU would gain representation in return for a substandard contract. "This was a top-down deal between an employer and a hand-picked union," DeMoro said. "There was a gag order on everyone, and as a result this was a banana republic election."

Both factions in the struggle have reactionary aims. While the SEIU has pursued the expansion of its base through collaboration with management and the imposition of contracts on workers, the CNA has opposed the SEIU's organization of nurses on the grounds that it combines nurses with lesser-skilled hospital workers and thereby prevents them from obtaining more favorable and exclusive contract terms. No new date has been set for a representation election at the Ohio hospitals.

Canada

Violence against pickets in food service strike

At least four separate incidents were reported last week of cars hitting striking workers on the picket line outside Seneca College's Markham campus north of Toronto. Twenty food service and janitorial staff went on strike March 10 for a first contract and to win wage parity with their counterparts at other area schools.

The striking workers are represented by Unite Here and are employed at the college by the multinational Aramark Company based out of Philadelphia. On the first day of the strike, police were called after one picketer was hit by a car, suffering minor injuries. Charges have been laid against at least one driver. Most of the strikers make less than C\$10 an hour, but Aramark has offered a wage increase of less than 10 cents an hour.



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