

Workers struggles: The Americas

1 April 2008

Latin America

Rail workers protest in Buenos Aires

Last Friday, rail workers and their supporters in Buenos Aires blocked ticket booths in two local rail stations (Constitución, the terminus of the General Roca suburban rail line, and Once, on the General Mitre line), allowing thousands of passengers to ride for free. The protest took place during the afternoon rush hour.

In Constitución, the protest was organized by the Popular Workers Bloc. The protesters demanded that nine sacked workers be rehired at their previous work locations. Management had previously agreed to reinstitute the workers, but at locations far from their homes.

At the Once station, protesting workers demanded a wage increase and that their family members be given priority consideration for new jobs.

Colombia: Nickel miners strike

After four weeks on strike, miners at the Cerro Matoso nickel mine have forced the company, owned by the Australian transnational giant BHP Billington, to cancel some of its deliveries. An increase in the world price of nickel is also being attributed to the strike—Cerro Matoso produces 4 percent of the world's nickel output.

The strike began on February 27. Negotiations will resume this week. The strikers are demanding an end to the employment of temporary workers.

United States

Dresser-Rand settles at one New York plant, another remains without contract

Houston-based Dresser-Rand Corp., maker of reciprocating compressors and turbo machinery products, reached a tentative agreement March 28 with United Steelworkers Local 4601 covering about 500 workers at its Olean, New York, facility, while no agreement has been reached with the International Union of Electrical Workers-Communication Workers of America (IUE-CWA) Local 313 at the company's plant in Painted Post, New York.

Workers at the Painted Post plant struck for 17 weeks

after their contract expired August 4. In November, the company declared an impasse and imposed its final offer, and the IUE-CWA bureaucracy ended the strike. Dresser-Rand recalled workers gradually, and some 60 strikers have yet to be recalled.

On April 3, the IUE-CWA will return to the bargaining table with the company. According to the union, it has asked a major healthcare provider to design a health insurance proposal that might be acceptable to the company and result in a tentative agreement. Workers from Painted Post will travel to St. Bonaventure University—near Olean in western New York state—on the same day to stage a protest when the school's board of trustees holds a meeting. Dresser-Rand President and Chief Executive Officer Vincent R. Volpe Jr. serves as a trustee at St. Bonaventure.

West Virginia casino workers strike against poverty wages

Workers at the Mountaineer Casino, Racetrack and Resort in Chester, West Virginia, walked out on strike March 29 demanding an end to poverty wages. The 206 cashiers, clerks and other workers voted by a 9-to-1 margin four days earlier to set up picket lines unless management made a serious effort to meet their demands.

Workers at the casino make an average \$9.34 an hour, with starting wages for cashiers at \$6.50 an hour. The United Food and Commercial Workers Local 23 proposed a \$4-an-hour wage increase for workers who are currently paid \$7 and \$8 an hour. Mountaineer negotiators put forward wage hikes between 65 and 85 cents an hour for the lowest-paid workers.

Union workers currently pay for 37.7 percent of their healthcare, while higher-paid Mountaineer management employees pay only 18 percent of their healthcare premiums. Local 23 Secretary-Treasurer Tony Helfner told the *West Virginia State Journal*, "Union members are earning wages that qualify them for food stamps, the school lunch program, energy assistance, and the children's health insurance program."

Canada

Ontario food service plant locked out

Two hundred seventy five workers at Sysco Food Services outside Peterborough, Ontario, east of Toronto, were locked out last week after voting for strike action. They had already set up pickets when the company locked out unionized workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, and immediately brought in replacement workers.

In addition to the workers at the plant, truck drivers will also be affected by the lock-out. The union has said that no talks will take place until scabs are removed from the plant, and that along with setting up picket lines, other unspecified actions will be taken. While a central impasse in the dispute is job seniority, other contract issues include work scheduling, workloads, wages and benefits.

The situation on the picket lines, which has seen a heavy police presence, is reportedly highly volatile. U.S.-based Sysco operates throughout North America with a work force of more than 51,000 providing service to hotels and other large institutions.

Toronto transit strike on hold

A threat of strike action by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), bargaining agent for 9,000 workers employed by the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), set for Tuesday of this week, has been effectively withdrawn. Union leaders are suggesting they may instead mount a work-to-rule campaign while pledging to give at least 48 hours notice before any further action.

ATU workers voted almost unanimously in early March to reject the latest TTC offer, leading to the authorization of the strike action.

At the same time, another bargaining unit organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents 500 electrical and signal workers, is also in a legal strike position as of April. Thus, despite the retreat by the ATU, transit in Canada's largest city could still be shut down this week.



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