

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 April 2008

Latin America

Peruvian miners strike

One thousand five hundred employees of Doe Run Perú walked off their jobs last Saturday at the La Oroya Metalurgical Complex demanding better wages and working conditions. The mining and processing facility produces lead, zinc, copper, silver and gold.

On the first day of the walkout, the striking miners and other workers rallied in the street of La Oroya, 174 kilometers east of Lima.

Doe Run managers confirmed that a walkout had taken place but claimed that not all workers were participating.

Strike by customs inspectors in Brazil

Custom inspectors in Brazil are in the third week of a strike that is disrupting exports and imports. In the port of Santos, the busiest in Latin America, warehouses are 90 percent full with commodities that are either destined for export or awaiting entry into Brazil. By the end of this week, if the strike continues, the loading and unloading of ships will be interrupted.

The strikers are demanding wage parity with immigration officers and a reduction in the time it takes for inspectors to be promoted from 18 to 12 months' employment. The workers are members of UNAFISCO, the Custom Officer's Union.

In addition, export-oriented industries are being forced to curtail production. For example, in the Free Trade Zone of Manaus in northern Brazil, manufacturers of cell phones, bicycles and electric appliances are shutting down production and laying off workers. Spare parts being held up are expected to lead to a slowdown in automobile production.

Brazilian airports and seaports face similar circumstances. Valdir Santos, president of the Union of Custom Dispatchers (SINDASP), warned that the strike's effect on the ports could increase if the National Treasury technical employees join the strike.

Brazil: Post office employees on strike in 11 states

Postal and telegraph workers in 11 Brazilian states walked off their jobs on April 1. The strike affects Bahia, Sergipe, Goiás, Ceará, Campinas, Ribeirão Preto, Santa Maria, Minas Gerais, Espiritu Santo, Roraima, Piauí and Paraná.

The Brazilian government has offered a 30 percent bonus if workers return to work while a final wage agreement is negotiated. In addition, the workers are demanding a 30 percent increase in wages, the return to a previous postal pension plan,

a profit-sharing plan and new rules to govern promotions.

United States

Relatives and friends of fallen construction workers speak out against union official

Relatives and friends of three members of Ironworkers Local 433 who died on Las Vegas, Nevada, construction sites have spoken out against the union's business agent, charging him with blaming workers for their own deaths and not opposing the construction companies.

In all, nine workers have died in the last 16 months working on major projects in Las Vegas. A familiar pattern has emerged whereby investigations by federal inspectors that initially found fault with the companies for safety violations have been reversed and fines reduced as a result of "informal conferences" between management representatives and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). Reports are then recast with workers being blamed for their own deaths.

Glenda Rose, whose boyfriend died last August, told the *Las Vegas Sun* that after speaking to Local 433 business agent Chuck Lenhart in the wake of the accident, she felt like he worked for the company as opposed to being a representative of the workers. She quoted him to the effect: "This is the line of work they do. This kind of stuff happens." Said Rose, "He was defending these companies to me. I remember walking away thinking: 'I thought you worked for [the contractor] Norvin.' "

Jessica Rabun, whose husband David died last November, reported to the *Sun* that Lenhart told her, "It's easy to become complacent" as an ironworker. "To me," said Rabun, "it was blaming my husband."

Last year, veteran ironworker Harold Billingsley fell 59 feet to his death through a hole that was left in an unfinished temporary floor. Billingsley's safety harness didn't work, and the company had failed to place a required safety net under the floor.

When Fred Toomey, who served as business agent for Local 433 during the 1970s and 1980s, went to the union hall to speak with Lenhart about the accident, he told the *Sun*, "He [Lenhart] took me on the job and we walked around. We went up 60 feet. Chuck says, 'See, this is his fault. He should have tied off to this cable, and then he wouldn't have fallen.' I said, 'Wait just a minute. This is 60 feet up in the air.... It's supposed to be completely decked over every 30 feet.' "

Lenhart was quoted in the *Sun* as saying, "As far as I can see

everything looks good out there. My contractors, they're performing in a workmanship-like manner."

Workers revealed at the end of a heavily attended April 4 union meeting, they were "hammered on a theme that the ironworkers take more personal responsibility for one another's safety." Local 433 President Robbie Hunter also ordered workers not to talk to the press. The *Sun* reported, "One ironworker said he considered Hunter's directive as nothing less than a threat that could cost him his job or worse if he crossed union leadership."

New York Catholic schoolteachers engage in selective strike

Nearly 200 teachers struck 10 Catholic schools in Manhattan, Staten Island, the Bronx and Westchester County last Friday. Members of the Federation of Catholic Teachers, which represents about 3,000 members, took the action to protest the lack of a new contract.

The Lay Faculty Association, another union representing about 400 teachers in 10 schools, said that they also are planning to strike and picket ceremonial events when Pope Benedict XVI visits New York City April 18 to 20. A spokesman for the Lay Faculty said the purpose of the actions, was not to disrupt the visit, but to gain the attention of high church officials. A spokeswoman for the Federation stated that they may also go out on strike during the pope's visit.

A spokesman for the archdiocese, which has 277 schools and 107,000 students, said that they made their final offer in November. The contract expired August 31 for both unionized teachers.

The workers in both unions are struggling to avoid paying a 10 percent increased premium for health insurance by 2010 that the archdiocese is demanding, and are seeking more of a wage increase and a better pension plan than what they have been offered. Teachers in Catholic schools make about \$45,000 a year, which is about \$25,000 less than teachers in the public school system.

The Federation engaged in the job action specifically to obtain the archdiocese's records of the health insurance claims, while the archdiocese has claimed that it has already provided the union with many documents and is preparing to provide some more. Catholic schools throughout the country have been experiencing financial difficulties and a 15 percent decline in enrollment since 2000, forcing school closings.

Though the strikers from the 10 schools went back to work on Monday, teachers from 8 other schools walked out.

One-day strike by Pennsylvania teachers

Teachers in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, carried out a one-day strike to draw attention to wage and healthcare issues in their current bargaining with the Northwest Area school district. The 100 teachers, who are members of the Pennsylvania Education Association, have been without a contract since August 2005 and were under a contractual wage freeze in the two years previous to that.

The union has agreed to pay part of their healthcare costs but not to the degree that school district officials are demanding. Teachers are also fighting for wage increases as well. School Board member Daryl Morgan told WNEP-TV, "I will never back down. I'm not giving them a cent."

Canada

Victoria library lockout ends

A lockout that closed nine libraries in the provincial capital of Victoria, British Columbia, since February 17 came to an end when workers voted to accept a new four-year contract on April 1.

The deal reportedly addresses the primary issue of pay equity for the 250 workers affected and includes, among other improvements, a 12 percent wage increase over the life on the contract. The workers had been without a contract for 454 days in a dispute that was embittered by the intractable position of the Greater Victoria Labour Relations Association.

Bitter Ontario lockout ends at Sysco

A strike that saw a number of workers injured on the picket line outside the Peterborough, Ontario, operations of food service giant Sysco Ltd. ended last week when workers voted to accept a new contract.

The deal, which has been hailed as a victory by negotiators for the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), representing 275 workers at the plant east of Toronto, includes modest wage improvements totaling C\$1.80 an hour over three years. The union says that the important seniority issues were resolved to their satisfaction.

The company inflamed tensions when it brought in replacement workers immediately after locking workers out on March 28. In response, picketers barricaded the plant for the better part of a day.



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