Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 April 2008

Chilean copper miners' strike

Night shift temporary miners at the El Teniente mine in northern Chile walked out on Saturday. The firm, owned by the Chilean government, is the world's largest copper producer and the mine produces 25 percent of Codelco's output. Because of the protest Codelco management decided to also suspend operations at two smaller mines, Andina and Salvador.

An El Teniente management spokesman declared that third shift operations had been suspended due to what he claimed was the violent nature of the workers' protest. Management had shut down the third shift at El Teniente on Friday and the first shift on Saturday.

The protests began last Wednesday. The miners are demanding Codelco carry out a 2007 agreement reached following a 37-day strike. The 2007 agreement included wage hikes and improvement in benefits. The company insists that the agreement has been fully implemented and said it would sue striking workers.

During the protests, temporary workers occupied some facilities, blocked roads and battled police. A confrontation also took place at the Chuquicamata mine, although that mine remained in operation.

Brazilian customs strike enters its second month

Overland commerce between Brazil and Argentina, its biggest trading partner, is paralyzed by a Brazilian Custom inspector strike. The conflict is over wages. Customs agents are demanding a 42 percent wage increase.

The action entered its second month on April 19. Industrial plants on both sides of the border are affected by a shortage of spare parts from factories on the other side. A Renault auto assembly plant in Argentina announced on April 16 that it would lay off 1,000 workers due to a lack of spare parts.

Overland traffic from Uruguay and Paraguay is also backed up. Operations at the Southern port of Santos, Brazil's busiest, are at a standstill.

The job action began as a protest strike on March 18. Custom inspectors returned to work under a court order on April 18. Although the strikers indicated that they would obey the court order, they declared a slowdown and threatened to delay for eight days procedures that normally require a three to eight hours.

New York Catholic teachers end their strike

Four hundred and fifty teachers at 10 Catholic schools, members of the Lay Faculty Association, returned to work on Monday after having reached a tentative settlement with the assistance of a mediator. Both union representatives and a lawyer for the archdiocese declined to discuss any of the terms of the agreement, except for the fact that the workers were compelled to return to their teaching jobs as part of the settlement.

The strike had begun Tuesday, April 15, and coincided with the Pope's visit to New York this past weekend. Although a union spokesman denied it, many observers believe that the walkout was timed in order to put pressure on the Church hierarchy to meet the demands of the teachers. The strike lasted only two days since the Catholic schools had already been scheduled to close on Thursday and Friday due to this Pope's visit. However, Charles Chesnavage, a vice president of the executive committee for the union, said that the return to work "doesn't necessarily mean we're going to accept their offer."

The union is seeking a pay hike to reach a maximum base salary to $60,000, up from the current $52,300. According to latest reports, the archdiocese was offering $58,225. The archdiocese was also demanding that the teachers increase their contributions to health insurance to 10 percent of costs, up from the current 5.9 percent to 7.6 percent. There is also a dispute over how to calculate pension benefits.

Another union, the Federation of Catholic Teachers representing about 3,000 members, had pulled a partial strike with only 200 teachers on the picket lines, and then reached a tentative four-year settlement last week. The terms of the contract include a 3 percent raise the first year, and 4 percent raises in each of the other three years. The teachers will also contribute 10 percent of their health care costs, up from 5.9 percent to 7.6 percent. There is one press report that the membership in this larger union has thus far refused to accept the deal.

Catholic schoolteachers earn an average of $45,000, about 30 percent less than their counterparts in the public school system. The teachers in the Catholic schools are rejecting the argument that the archdiocese is paying them as much as it can afford. For example, many workers say that since the

© World Socialist Web Site

Church has a lot of money to pay for lawsuits against pedophile priests, they can find the money for those who teach the children.

Union organizers and officials attacked at Los Angeles construction site

The *Orange County Building Trades News* reports that five union officials and organizers were attacked at a downtown Los Angeles construction site back in March by nonunion contractors wielding iron rebar and 2 x 4s. Ironworkers Local 433 President Robbie Hunter suffered multiple injuries, including a fractured cheekbone and a severed lip. IBEW organizer Larry Henderson had his arm fractured and three other organizers received multiple bruises.

A civil rights lawsuit was subsequently filed against two contractors—Hirex and Golden Gate Steel—as well as several unnamed persons involved in the attack. Ellyn Moscowitz, an attorney for the unions, issued a statement, saying, "The violent assault against these union organizers is not only reprehensible, it is also a violation of their civil rights. These men were attacked because of their position as union organizers; that makes this a hate crime in the state of California. Employers who engage in these crimes can expect that the full weight of the legal system will be brought to bear on them."

Unionbusting by St. Paul liquor distributor

Some 700 drivers and warehouse workers at Johnson Brothers Liquor Company in St. Paul, Minnesota have been out on strike since March 17 after management refused to bargain seriously with Teamsters Local 792. According to the union, management sought to split workers by imposing a wage increase only for what are called "supplemental" workers. Once on strike, the company immediately began hiring replacement workers and has been running placing ads for "permanent" replacements.

Teamsters report that when strikers follow trucks manned by replacement workers to retailers and set up temporary picket lines during the delivery, other non-striking drivers refuse to make their deliveries. However, the Teamsters have given no indication that they intend to mobilize the support of other workers. Instead the labor bureaucracy has tried to limit the scope of the strike to appeals before the National Labor Relations Board and the call for a boycott of Phillips liquors, Gallo wines and Karkov Vodka—all labels that are distributed nationwide by Johnson Brothers.

US Airway pilots vote in new union

Pilots at US Airways voted April 18 to oust the Air Line Pilots Union (ALPA) and replace it with an independent union. The ouster of ALPA was triggered by a long-simmering battle over the terms that will govern the integration of operations resulting from the 2005 merger of US Airways and America West Airlines and the manner in which it affects pilots' compensation and seniority.

The newly elected union—US Airline Pilots Association (USAPA)—says it would set aside an arbitrators ruling made last year, that is claimed to have diluted the seniority of US Airways pilots in the merger. USAPA's web site claims it has written a clause into its bylaws that obligates it to maintain a position whereby, "seniority integration will occur by date-of-hire with reasonable conditions and restrictions."

The merger of pilot seniority lists is also expected to become a bone of contention in the merger of Delta and Northwest Airlines. Moments after the April 14 announcement to merge the two airlines, Northwest pilots said they would oppose the merger.

Montreal ambulance strike gets help

Emergency dispatch officers at Urgences Sante carried out a one-day strike April 15 to protest the slow pace of contract negotiations.

Due to essential service laws in Quebec, responders and dispatchers for ambulance services can only strike one hour per day per person', so that their one-day strike last week would have had little public exposure, had they not been joined by scores of health care workers on the picket line.

Members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) who took the strike action have been without a contract sine June 2003 and are fighting for pay equity with 911 dispatchers in Montreal who their union says make 32 percent more. The city, however, is insisting on a two-year wage freeze and limited subsequent yearly increases to 2 percent.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site