

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 April 2008

Latin America

Chile: Copper miners continue strike against Codelco

On Sunday, striking copper miners in Chile reached the 12th day of their strike against Codelco, the state-owned corporation that operates Chile's copper mines. The strike by miners employed under temporary contracts has shut down the Andina and El Salvador mines in northern Chile. A third mine, El Teniente, which reopened on Saturday, is operating intermittently. The strikers say that the firm has not complied with an agreement that ended a strike last year.

The temporary workers have declared that they plan to escalate their strike and mobilizations if an agreement is not forthcoming, said strike leader Cristián Cuevas on Friday.

Codelco management has charged miners with wearing masks to engage in violent actions, such as stoning buses carrying Codelco miners and employees into the El Teniente mine. Cuevas denied that the strikers had anything to do with those incidents. "We are in a general strike, said Cuevas, with our faces out in the open, blocking roads with our faces out in the open." He accused the government of using this strike as part of its campaign to repress the unions.

Peru: Miners block highway

Hundreds of striking miners blocked Peru's Central Highway, one of the principal arteries into Lima. The workers, from mines near Casapalca in central Peru, barricaded the road with rocks and are standing guard to prevent authorities from removing the barricade.

The strike began on April 22. The miners are fighting for decent wages, permanent jobs and an end to arbitrary sackings.

Mexican copper miners reject offer

The Mexican miners' union rejected on April 25 an offer of early retirement for striking miners at the Cananea copper mine, one of the largest open-pit mines

in Latin America. The offer by Grupo México was the latest attempt to end a nine-month-long strike. Grupo México is a transnational corporation that also owns mines in the United States and Peru.

The miners have been on strike since last July at Cananea and other Grupo México mines, demanding better wages, improved health and safety conditions and the restoration of the leader of the miners' union, who was removed from office by former Mexican President Vicente Fox and is now in exile in Canada.

Last week, the strikers received a letter from the company. In it, management claimed that the mine had been shut down and that they were offering generous compensation to workers that agreed to resign.

Union spokesperson Carlos Pavón declared that nobody was picking up the severance envelopes. "They wish to close the mine, but are unable to," said Pavón. Grupo México sent similar letters to striking miners at the San Martín plant in Zacatecas. That letter indicated that that the silver mine was small and only had a few years' reserves. Last year, Grupo México shut down the Taxco mine, also in Zacatecas State.

The miners' union argues that the company does not have the legal right to shut down mines during a strike.

United States

Court order bars further activity in wake of New Jersey school walkout

A Camden, New Jersey, court issued a temporary restraining order following a April 21 walkout by school employees. The restraining order bans any further job actions and requires Communication Workers of America (CWA) union leaders to appear before a Superior Court judge on April 28.

Custodians, lunch aides, cafeteria workers and kitchen managers represented by CWA Local 1079 took part in the walkout. Under state law, schools must close if they can't staff buildings with the proper licensed staff.

The CWA reports that in the current contract talks,

the school administration is demanding school workers pay a portion of their healthcare costs. In addition, workers are being offered wage increases of only 4 percent or less. Workers are pressing for wage increases comparable to those recently received by teachers that added up to annual hikes of 5 percent and 4.9 percent.

New York Catholic teachers reject tentative settlement

Members of the Lay Faculty Association rejected a tentative settlement that had ended a two-day strike that began on April 15. The 450 teachers who had walked off their jobs at 10 Catholic schools are now deciding whether they will conduct another strike.

Terms of the agreement have not been publicized but are presumably similar to the one that was accepted by the Catholic Federation of Teachers, representing about 3,000 members. They had received a 3 percent raise the first year and 4 percent raises in each of the next three years of a four-year contract. Their contract also includes an increase of their contribution to healthcare costs, which will increase to 10 percent from the current 5.9-7.6 percent.

Tennessee construction worker dies in 11-story fall

A worker fell to his death from the 11th story of the Embassy Suites hotel and conference center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration and local police investigating the site called the death an “accident” and said the victim fell through a 24-by-40 inches opening in the airshaft, which is used to pressurize the building and facilitate the removal of smoke in the event of a fire.

Investigators did not release the name of the victim pending the notification of family members. The new 283-room hotel and 80,000-square-foot conference center, begun in 2006, is scheduled to be completed by September 15 of this year.

Canada

B.C. loggers picket against replacements

Up to 40 loggers, many of whom were laid off when Munns Lumber went bankrupt earlier this year, staged a picket last week against the hiring of replacement workers near Mesachie Lake on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

The workers are being brought in by forestry giant TimberWest, which took over operations it had

previously been contracting to Munns. The United Steelworkers union, which represents the workers, disputes the company’s claim that it is an illegal picket, saying the nonunion replacements are now doing the same job as the workers who lost their jobs in January.



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