

Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 May 2008

Latin America

Peruvian miners end three-week strike

Miners at the Casapalca mine ended a strike last week demanding a profit-sharing bonus of 10,000 soles. In a deal brokered by the Labor Ministry, workers accepted 2,500 soles over three months.

Union leader Pedro Condori declared the strike a victory even though most of the workers' demands were not met.

Chilean miners threaten new strike

Copper miners subcontracted by the state-owned Codelco mining corporation threatened on May 16 to renew a three-week strike that ended last week unless the company pays them an agreed-upon 300,000 peso (US\$645) bonus.

A Codelco spokesperson indicated that the company had handed over the money to the workers' employers, and that the latter appear to be portioning out the money over a period of time. The miners are insisting they receive the full amount immediately.

Transport workers strike continues in Nicaragua

A strike by truckers and taxi and bus operators in Nicaragua is its second week. The strike is disrupting inter-city travel and the delivery of cargo across the country and has forced President Daniel Ortega to cancel a trip to a summit of Latin American Caribbean and European Presidents in Peru.

The strikers, many of them owner-operators, are demanding relief from high fuel prices and have rejected a government subsidy of US\$0.50 per gallon for diesel fuel.

Last Tuesday, security forces attempted to end a road blockade 40 miles from Managua. The confrontation resulted in 10 wounded and 20 arrests.

Argentina: metal workers and food workers to strike this week

The Metal Workers Union (UOM) will commence strike action on May 19 to press for wage increases for its 200,000 members. The 80,000-member Federation

of Food Workers (FTIA) also plans strike action.

Metal workers are demanding a 32 percent wage increase. An association of employers is offering a 20 percent raise. For their part, food workers are demanding a 35 percent raise, while management is offering 20 percent.

United States

Immigrant workers launch hunger strike in front of White House

Five workers from India launched a hunger strike in front of the White House on May 14 to protest their exploitation by their former employer, Signal International, along with the Indian and US recruiters who conspired against them.

Hundreds of workers from India and the United Arab Emirates paid \$15,000 to \$20,000 to recruiters under the pretense they would receive green cards and permanent residence in the United States. Instead, they were used as a temporary cheap labor force in the Gulf Coast states affected by Hurricane Katrina. Forced to live in cramped, unsanitary quarters and under constant threats, the workers suffered both psychologically and physically from the inhumane treatment.

Over the weekend, the hunger strikers relocated their protest to the statue of Mahatma Gandhi in front of the Indian embassy. A statement prepared by the hunger strikers stated: "If we, the workers of India, can have the courage to talk to US Congressmen and US federal authorities, then surely the Indian government can do the same so that no other Indian worker suffers as we did."

The workers, comprising welders and pipefitters, launched strikes in recent months against their exploitation. They have been supported through a class-action lawsuit filed in part by the Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Alabama.

Virginia General Dynamics workers reject contract, continue strike

Some 350 striking workers at the General Dynamics

plant in Marion, Virginia, rejected a new contract proposal May 10 as the strike passed the four-week mark. Complete details of the latest proposal were not available. United Defense Workers president Gary Blevins termed the agreement as “two steps forward and three steps back.”

The contract’s margin of defeat was 87 percent, the same margin by which an earlier agreement was voted down. Among the changes that drew the ire of workers was an extension of the contract’s duration from 36 months to 42 months, which would create a November 2011 expiration date. “The membership would be facing cold weather, Christmas, and taxes,” said Blevins. “That would put the membership in a bad position to negotiate. They could bring a really trashy contract and we would be under pressure.”

Currently, General Dynamics is using office staff to carry out production. On May 2, Boeing Corp. selected General Dynamics as the preferred provider for a new upgrade for the F15 fighter jets’ radar system, which will involve production at the Marion facility.

Canada

CAW rams through auto deal

In contract ratification meetings held over the weekend, autoworkers at both General Motors and Chrysler voted to accept sweeping concessions in new three-year agreements patterned after the deal signed with Ford last week. Eighty-seven percent of those voting at Chrysler accepted the pact, while at General Motors 84 percent voted for ratification. Members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) were given less than 48 hours, and in some cases less than 24 hours notice, between the announcement of the tentative contracts by union president Buzz Hargrove and the convening of the local ratification votes.

The pattern deals, signed fully four months before the expiration of the existing three-year contracts and more than a month before the CAW was to convene its traditional delegated conference to determine bargaining demands, follow the pattern of sweeping concessions notoriously negotiated by UAW bureaucrats south of the border over many years.

The new contracts freeze current workers’ wages for the life of the three-year deal, cut 40 hours of vacation pay per year, tighten caps for long-term medical care, increase employee co-pays on prescription drugs, reduce pension entitlements, and freeze cost-of-living

(COLA) adjustments for the remainder of the current contract and the first year of the new deal.

The pacts also lay the basis for the implementation of a two-tier wage system by forcing new hires to begin work at 70 percent of the wages earned by other autoworkers and with reduced benefits. Only after three years of employment will new hires earn the wages and benefits of current workers. A C\$25,000 retirement benefit for autoworkers will be discontinued. In exchange for selling off gains won in decades of struggle, autoworkers are to be given two one-time “bonus” payments totaling C\$5,700 (US\$5,693). The contracts also set the stage for further layoffs with “improved restructuring benefits” clauses.



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