

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 May 2008

## Latin America

### Mexico: Strike at Radio Monitor

On May 23, employees of Mexico City's Radio Monitor walked off the job because they had not been paid. The union representing the workers, the Radio and Television Union, indicated that the strike is indefinite. Union officials say that workers' wages have been in arrears on and off since one year ago. This last period of arrears has lasted more than four months.

At 3 p.m. on Friday, Radio Monitor stopped transmitting after the 90 union and 50 supervisory workers rejected management's proposal to give workers their last two weeks' pay and make up the arrears in September.

Monitor employees blame the present government of President Felipe Calderón and the previous government of Vicente Fox for the station's troubles. The strikers charged that another station, Radio Centro, has used its influence with advertisers and the government to punish the Radio Monitor through "surgical operation" to make the station disappear.

Radio Monitor operates on several frequencies on the AM band and on the Internet. It transmits throughout Mexico.

### Mexican foundry workers and miners threaten to widen strike

The Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union is threatening to widen a 10-month-long strike in defense of union leader Napoleón Gomez. Gomez was removed from office by former President Vicente Fox in the wake of the Pasta de Conchos coal mine collapse of February 2006. Gomez was accused of embezzling 50 million pesos. He now resides in Canada.

Last July, workers at mines and smelters owned by Grupo Mexico walked off their jobs demanding that the government drop all charges against Gomez, who has continued to run the union. On July 30, 2007, the union initiated a strike at the Cananea copper mine and two smaller plants, demanding that charges be dropped against Gomez.

Napoleón Gomez was reelected to head the union for another six-year term by 35 union bureaucrats in a closed-door session of the union leadership on May 7. The union demands that the government of Felipe Calderón recognize Gomez as a leader and drop all warrants against him, and is threatening to strike the sprawling Altos Hornos Steel Foundry and other mines and plants if the government fails to do so.

### Protest follows killing of taxi driver in Argentina

The murder of taxi driver Sergio Ángel Oberto on May 22 caused a massive protest that paralyzed Rosario, Argentina. Taxi drivers blocked downtown Rosario, and bus and jitney service was cancelled during the day in response to a call from the transit unions for a one-day strike. Teachers and bank and commercial workers also joined the protest strike.

Sergio Oberto, a 50-year-old driver, had his throat slashed in the early morning hours. Authorities arrested six people in connection with the murder.

An assembly of the taxi drivers' union decided to continue the protest this week by suspending service at night until this Friday.

### Mexico: Wholesale produce market workers to strike May 30

Janitorial workers at the wholesale produce market in Mexico City have set a strike date of May 30. The workers charge management with acts of kidnapping, assault and repression against the market employees.

On April 29, the 41 workers were duped into attending a meeting in a hotel near the market. At the meeting, 10 goons prevented the workers from leaving, demanding that they sign documents resigning from their jobs. Fourteen workers signed the documents. Those that refused were released after a few hours.

The intimidation continues, however. On May 5, janitors cleaning the bathrooms were forced to leave and were replaced by new workers. The night workers were not allowed to begin their shift. The morning shift of May 6 was violently expelled with the collaboration of the police. All the employees were replaced by scab workers

employed by OESSA, a janitorial subcontractor.

Many workers have been contacted at their homes, demanding that they quit their positions.

### **United States**

#### **Janitors strike contractors in California's Silicon Valley**

Unionized janitors began a series of rolling strikes May 20 against cleaning contractors who provide services for the giant tech firms of Santa Clara County, California, in Silicon Valley. According to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877, several hundred janitors who work at companies such as Applied Materials, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard and Yahoo were involved during the first days of the strike last week.

The SEIU represents, in all, some 6,000 janitors in Silicon Valley. On the other side of the bargaining table is the Bay Area Maintenance Contractors, representing cleaning companies such as Able, ABM, One Source, DMS and Service by Medallion. The SEIU charges that the big tech firms impose terms on the cleaning services that constrain them to operate within "razor-thin" profits. The result is that janitors in Silicon Valley earn a mere \$11.04 an hour while their co-workers in San Francisco earn \$17.05 an hour. According to the US Department of Housing, the rent for a one-bedroom apartment in San Jose would consume 77 percent of a Silicon Valley janitor's earnings.

Janitors are seeking pay and benefit increases over the 40-cents-an-hour pay increase contained in the four-year contract proposal submitted by cleaning company negotiators. The old contract covering janitors expired April 30.

#### **Stanford University janitors walk out**

Some 130 janitors struck Stanford University near Palo Alto, California, May 21 after rejecting ABM Janitorial Services' five-year contract offering a paltry annual wage increase of 10 cents. The strikers, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 717, are seeking wider gains in both wages and benefits.

Under the previous contract, which expired April 30, Stanford janitors received a mere \$1.00 increase in wages over the course of the old five-year contract. Workers, supported by students, held a march and demonstration May 21 that culminated in front of ABM's campus office.

### **Canada**

#### **Montreal Petro-Canada refinery workers remain locked out**

Delegates to the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) Special Bargaining Conference and

supporters of 267 locked-out Petro-Canada refinery workers staged protests this weekend in Montreal. The rally was in support of the members of Local 175 of the CEP who have been locked out by the company since last November. Prior to the lockout, the refinery employees had been working without a contract since February 2007.

The oil refiner is demanding that the traditional three-year agreement be extended to six years. Since safety clauses are crucial in a refining industry subject to rapid technological development, the longer contract term would allow the company to fast-track employees into higher-risk jobs without adequate safety protection written into the contract. In addition, the company is seeking the elimination of a crucial safety officer position. Petro-Canada is also demanding concessions in seniority rights and the break-up of the national bargaining pattern.

National CEP President Dave Coles called several protest rallies over the winter, but refused to mobilize the membership of the CEP in job actions against Petro-Canada despite the fact that its members also work out of the extremely lucrative Petro-Canada refinery in Edmonton, Alberta. Coles has restricted the fight to appeals for a boycott of company gas stations and entreaties to Petro-Canada stockholders—most recently leafleting businessmen at an April meeting of Calgary refiners.

Last summer, the membership voted to authorize the union leadership to call a strike. However, negotiators for the local opted to continue bargaining even while the company began training their managers to run the refinery. Once this replacement workforce was fully trained, Petro-Canada, the third largest oil company in the country, made the decision to implement their lockout strategy.

With the price of oil skyrocketing, Petro-Canada's two refineries have proven to be cash cows for the company. About 13 percent of Canada's refining capacity is accounted for by the two facilities. The company is using managerial staff alongside replacement workers to keep production going at the refinery. Employing replacement workers during a labor dispute in Quebec is a labor law violation.



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