

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 June 2008

Latin America

Chile: Dockworkers strike

About 1,700 dockworkers are on strike in the Chilean port of San Antonio. The strike is over wages and working conditions. The strikers are demanding that temporary and contract workers be paid the same as permanent workers.

San Antonio is Chile's second largest port.

Educators to strike in Chile

Chilean public school teachers have set a national strike date for June 4. The teachers oppose a draft General Education Law (GEL) making its way through the legislature. Jaime Gajardo, president of the teachers union, said, "The GEL does not address the serious social inequities of the education system or the quality of education." Union leaders charged that the GEL "deepens the mercantilist nature of current education policies."

On June 4, teachers will mobilize at the Plaza de Armas in downtown Santiago. There will also be rallies and other activities across Chile. High school and college students have been campaigning for quality schools for all students, across income levels and social classes, by occupying schools and marching in the streets.

Oil workers strike in Argentina

On May 31, oil workers in the Argentine Province of Santa Cruz ended a 31-day strike over wages and declared a 30-day truce. The decision followed a decision by a consortium of oil companies to increase wages by 15 percent and rehire sacked workers by one of the oil companies, Sipetrol. The group of companies negotiating with the oil workers includes Repson YPF and Petrobras, the Brazilian state-owned oil company.

During the truce, oil workers' unions will press for other contract demands.

Labor strife escalates in Argentina

A release from the Adital Press Agency reports on statistics released by the Argentine Workers Central

(CTA—one of the nation's labor federations) that indicate a 7 percent increase in strikes in the first three months of 2008, compared to the same period last year.

Of the 107 strikes, 73 percent were in the private sector. The rest, 27 percent, were in the public sector. Sixty-two percent of the struggles affected the industrial Buenos Aires province and oil and mining southern provinces of Patagonia. The increase in strikes may be related to popular reaction against increasing inflation in Argentina.

United States

Three workers injured in Wyoming crane collapse

Three workers were injured when a giant crane collapsed at the Black Thunder coal mine located in northeastern Wyoming. One of the injured was reportedly evacuated by helicopter while two others were driven out by ambulance. A deputy sheriff told the Associated Press that two of the people involved in the accident were in "very critical" condition, but few other details were available.

According to witnesses, the crane was moving a 260-foot section of conveyor tube when the accident happened. The tube was one element in new conveyor project that would move coal from the mine to railroad cars. Back in April, the *Casper Star-Tribune* revealed that a 2.7 million-pound crane, called one of the largest in the world, had been brought in to facilitate in constructing the project.

Struck New York-area transit company to use strikebreakers

Management at the struck Short Line commuter service said it would use strikebreakers to operate its buses that provide transportation links into New York City. The decision comes as a federal mediator has been brought in to restart talks in the strike involving 240 drivers, mechanics and ticket agents represented by Transport Workers of America Local 225.

Workers voted to begin their strike on May 23 after voting by a 101-89 margin to reject the company's last

offer, which was supported by the union's negotiating committee. Among the issues that workers objected to were revisions in long-standing work rules that govern sick pay and vacations. The three-year agreement provided for wage increases of 4.5 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent.

Short Line, which is owned by Hudson Transit Lines, provides bus services into New York City from the New York counties of Rockland and Orange as well as from northern New Jersey.

Canada

Striking Sudbury bank tellers rally in Toronto

Sixty-two striking bank tellers, customer service representatives and financial advisors from Sudbury, Ontario, were joined by more than 600 delegates to the biannual convention of the Canadian Labour Congress in a rally in front of the headquarters of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) in downtown Toronto. The bank workers, from all five CIBC branches in the Sudbury area, have been on strike for a first contract since January 14. CIBC has employed replacement workers from the very beginning of the dispute in order to break the strike.

The strikers, organized in Local 2020 of the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), initially voted 27-25 to reject a contract that undercut their modest wage demands and would have forced them to pay 35 percent of their own benefits. The local membership has pointed out that while CIBC squeezes low-paid workers, it grants millions of dollars in bonuses to company executives, including a recent C\$9 million payment to the Bank CEO. CIBC is currently the subject of a class action lawsuit by workers who claim that the bank has for years forced its branch staff to work unpaid overtime.

Over the winter, the strikers sent informational pickets to CIBC branches in North Bay, Parry Sound and Elliott Lake. Several weeks ago, CIBC tabled a second offer that was overwhelmingly rejected by the strikers in a 48-3 vote.

The Canadian banking industry has been an occasional target for union organizing drives over the years. However, inroads into the financial sector have been few and far between. Workers at a CIBC Call Centre in Vancouver signed a collective agreement in 2005. A handful of other bank installations have been briefly unionized and later broken and decertified.



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