

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 June 2008

Latin America

Brazilian airline workers threaten to strike

Workers belonging to unions representing employees at the VarigLog airline met in Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre and Guarulhos on June 7 and 8 to decide on strike action against the company, which plans to sack nearly half the workforce. The layoffs are driven by a dispute between the airline's shareholders and the Matlin Patterson investment fund, based in the United States.

So far, 270 employees have been sacked. Union officials declared that the workers did not receive the required indemnity pay and that the company is blocking unemployment checks.

Teachers reach agreement in Oaxaca, México

Teachers in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca signed a tentative agreement with the government to end a three-week-long strike that has shut down schools throughout the state.

The teachers, members of the National Syndicate of Education Workers (SNTE), demanded, among other things, the rehiring of teachers who were fired two years ago during the mass protests in the city of Oaxaca and that Oaxaca Governor Ulises Ruiz be removed from office. While it appears that SNTE leaders dropped the second demand, there are signs that Federal authorities acquiesced to the first demand.

The SNTE protest took the form of rotating day-day strikes across the state, throughout the three-week period.

Two years ago, the city was paralyzed by a series of social protests that involved public school teachers and other layers of the working class. Twenty people were killed, and many more were injured and arrested.

Police attack unemployed workers in Argentina

On June 7, police in the northwestern Argentine city of La Quiaca, on the border with Bolivia, attacked a group of protesting unemployed workers that had occupied city hall. Ten workers were injured.

Popular and civil rights organizations denounced the attack and rejected claims by the governor of Jujuy Province that there had been "no repression," only

"shoving." La Quiaca Bishop Jesús Olmedo, who marched with the unemployed, called the police action a "massacre" and denounced the high levels of hunger and unemployment. "The lack of hope in the future of the children cannot be minimized," declared the bishop. Protest leader José Luis Martínez, who moves around in a wheelchair, suffered from tear gas inhalation from this incident.

A report in the Buenos Aires daily *Clarín* indicates that living standards in La Quiaca are very low and that 50 percent of the city's children are considered malnourished.

Chilean government reduces diesel tax after three-day truckers' protest

On Friday, June 6, the government of Michelle Bachelet reduced taxes on diesel fuel after a three-day strike by truckers, most of whom are owner-operators. The work stoppage began as a 48-hour strike, but truckers voted to extend the walkout indefinitely. As part of the protest, 6,000 trucks had been parked, blocking access to key roads.

The government refused to eliminate the tax on fuel, but agreed to a rebate of 80 percent of the tax collected this year and 100 percent of next year's receipts. Chile imports almost all of its fuel; oil wells in the South are nearly exhausted, and truckers and motorists are being squeezed by increasing world prices.

United States

Montana coal miners strike

Miners at Montana's Absaloka open-pit coalmine struck Westmoreland Resources, Inc. on June 7 after voting down the company's offer of four days earlier. According to an Operating Engineers Local 400 official, the 125-member local defeated the contract overwhelmingly.

Among the issues that triggered the strike was Westmoreland Resources' attempt to push through a five-year contract, as opposed a traditional three-year agreement. The company and union also have differences over work schedule and payment of premium time for

holidays and Sundays. The previous contract expired on March 1 and was extended until March 20. Workers are also demanding that they receive back pay to March 1.

The Absaloka mine is located on the Crow Indian reservation and is leased by the tribe to Westmoreland Resources. It produces 7 million tons of coal annually. Westmoreland is currently negotiating to extend the boundary of the surface mine by 3,660 acres, which would tap an estimated 77 million tons more coal.

California farm workers protest heat stroke death

Farm workers arrived on June 5 at the state capital in Sacramento, California, after a four-day march to protest the heat stroke death of a 17-year-old field laborer. Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez, who was two months pregnant, collapsed after working nine hours in 101-degree heat on May 16.

Some 50 farm workers carried an empty casket from Lodi to the state capital as a pilgrimage on behalf of Jimenez and other workers who have died in the agricultural fields of California due to neglect and indifference on the part of employers.

United Farm Workers' president Arturo Rodriguez called the death of Jimenez "preventable." Witnesses claim that Merced Farm Labor, the labor agency for which Jimenez was working, failed to provide shade or cool drinking water for several hours. When Jimenez arrived at the hospital, her body temperature was 108.4 degrees.

On June 4, California's labor commissioner, Angela Bradstreet, began proceedings to revoke Merced Farm Labor's contracting license. The revocation stems from a 2006 citation against the contractor for failing to train employees on how to avoid heat stress. The citations were never resolved, and the \$2,250 in fines was never paid. Specifically, the revocation is being applied against Merced Farm Labor because it did not disclose the existence of the citations when it filed license applications in September 2007.

Indiana construction strike ends

Construction workers in Lafayette, Indiana, ended their strike June 5 after negotiators for 43 construction companies and Laborers Local 274 reached an agreement. No details on the accord have been made available.

According to Local 274, their 1,000 members have not had a raise in two years and the contract proposal did not provide a sufficient increase to overcome past lost wages. The union was also pressing for better benefits.

The strike caused delays and shutdowns of several projects including the new \$200 million hospital for

Clarian Health.

Canada

Casino workers strike

Seven hundred workers at three casinos in Brantford, Ontario, located about one hour west of Toronto, went on strike June 1 after negotiations for what would be only their second contract collapsed. The workers, employed by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG), a government-authorized agency, are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

A central issue in the dispute is the high number of part-time workers; only 45 percent of employees work full time, down from 60 percent just over a year ago. As a result of the strike, 50 casino supervisors, who were recently organized under a different union that has yet to win a contract, have been laid off and many of them have joined the picket line in support of the strike. No talks are currently scheduled.

Women's shelter dispute continues

About 100 workers joined a protest June 6 to mark the second week of the lockout of 50 workers—members of the CAW—at two shelters operated by the Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region. The workers, who are among the lowest paid in southern Ontario, were locked out after overwhelmingly rejecting the latest contract offer. The proposed agreement included major concession demands such as forcing workers to alternate work sites, increased qualifications and an increase in part-time staff with no guarantees for full-time. The workers' last contract expired on May 23, and the latest round of talks broke off on June 3. The employer has refused union demands to send the dispute to third-party arbitration.



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