

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 July 2008

Latin America

General strike call in Peru

The CGTP, Peru's largest labor federation, has called for a general strike July 9 to protest the economic policies of the government of President Alan Garcia, including the recent trade treaty signed with the United States.

"The government's economic policy just benefits small, privileged groups," said Mario Huaman, secretary general of the CGTP. He said the one-day walkout will include workers from a broad range of industries.

Garcia predicted the strike would fail and would serve to "scare away investors" that have poured billions of dollars into the country's mining, oil and construction industries in the recent period. The approval rating of Garcia stands at just 30 percent.

Peruvian miners end walkout

The largest federation of mineworkers in Peru called off its nationwide walkout Sunday after one week. The union called the strike to protest rising consumer prices and demand that Congress pass legislation raising the cap on profit sharing so that workers can benefit from record-high copper prices.

Last week huge protests by miners and university students in Lima led to at least three injuries. Police fired tear gas at a crowd of about 1,000 miners as they tried to approach the parliament building.

Union leaders agreed to end the strike after receiving verbal assurances from government officials of a lower minimum age for retirement. Workers had also wanted an eight-hour workday and the right to enroll in state-supported pension funds.

Copper prices hit a two-month high last week due to the walkout. Peru is the world's second largest producer of the metal. The strike had only a limited impact on production because employers used strikebreakers. In addition, workers at several mines returned to work Friday.

United States

New York City cement truck drivers strike

Over 400 New York cement truck drivers walked off the job July 1 after union representatives for Teamsters Local 282 pulled out of talks with negotiators for contractors. The result has been a rapid slowdown of work on major construction projects throughout the city, including the Freedom Tower, the Second Avenue subway, the new Yankee Stadium, and the new ballpark that will replace Shea Stadium for the New York Mets.

The *New York Times* quoted the president of a carpenters local as saying, "A lot of our carpenters have been laid off until the strike is settled. I would say it's in the range of 2,000 members. Without concrete deliveries, we can't proceed."

Negotiations between the Quadrozzi Concrete Corporation, which owns 50 trucks, and the union ended when the contract expired last Monday at midnight. The walkout began shortly thereafter and negotiations are not expected to resume until some time this week. A spokesman for the union, Local 283 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, said the main issues were wages and working conditions. City officials have spoken to both sides in an attempt to end the dispute. The two sides were scheduled to resume talks July 7.

Seattle sprinkler fitters strike construction sites

Seattle sprinkler fitters walked off the job July 1 to protest the current contract offer by construction contractors. Some 500 members of Sprinkler Fitters Local 699 rejected contract terms by an 85 percent margin.

The National Fire Sprinkler Association (NFSA), the industry group representing contractors, is seeking a four-year contract, as opposed to the traditional three-year agreement. The NFSA also wants to increase the number of apprentices who are paid half the \$24 to \$30 an hour that the other workers receive. In addition, the contractors want to impose mandatory drug testing.

Other building trades workers are honoring Local 699 picket lines at more than 25 construction sites in the city.

Minnesota judge finds Wal-Mart violated state labor laws

A Dakota County judge ruled that Wal-Mart Stores forced its Minnesota employees to work off the clock by skipping rest and meal breaks and not paying workers for the time they spent in training. Judge Robert King found that the giant retailer had committed more than two million statutory violations and awarded workers \$6.5 million in compensation.

The case originated when four workers brought a class-action lawsuit on behalf of 56,000 Minnesota Wal-Mart workers employed between 1998-2004. A jury trial scheduled for October will ultimately decide the final amount to be paid by Wal-Mart. The company issued a statement disassociating itself from the widespread abuse and attempted to blame store managers. Wal-Mart also indicated it would consider appealing the decision.

ILWU, employers continue negotiations past contract expiration date

Contract talks between negotiators for the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the 25,000-member International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) have continued past the old contract's expiration date of July 1. After a break for the 4th of July holiday weekend, which also includes the union's July 5th celebration of "Bloody Thursday"—commemorating the 1934 West Coast Waterfront Strike which resulted in the recognition of the ILWU—bargaining was set to resume July 7.

The preliminary discussions, which began in mid-March, marked the earliest start for negotiations in the union's history. Undoubtedly, the union bureaucrats are hoping to avoid a repeat of 2002 when the PMA used a lockout, the invocation of the Taft-Hartley Act, legal attacks and provocations to push through job cuts and concessions. The Bush administration, citing the "war on terror" and national security, threatened to use troops to keep the docks working should the union resort to a slowdown or strike. Faced with these concerted attacks, union officials resorted to nationalistic appeals and appeals to the Democratic Party, a strategy that proved useless.

Canada

Grain workers to strike

As many as 1,000 grain workers in Saskatchewan and British Columbia employed by Viterra Inc. are poised to go on strike this week following the company's announcement of its intention to implement the contract offer rejected by unionized workers last month.

For its part the company warns that it plans to institute what it calls a "modified lockout" this week. The two sides dispute what is actually on offer, with the company claiming it is proposing wage increases totaling 27 percent over five years and the union saying that much of the money the company says is on offer was already committed in previous agreements. Also at issue are matters of job classification and benefits. The majority of the company's 4,000 employees are not unionized. Union leaders view the lockout as an attempt to provoke a strike.

Snap strikes at Quebec hotels

In the first of what promises to be a series of similar actions, last Friday 1,500 workers at four major hotels in Montreal staged a "snap" strike—an unannounced brief withdrawal of service—in an effort to pressure hotels across the province to speed negotiations for a new contract. The workers are represented by the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), which has promised to step up its pressure tactics if hotel owners do not begin to bargain in earnest.

Although wages and pensions are central issues in their dispute, the union is also seeking reductions in workloads, particularly for chambermaids who have seen their responsibilities climb as hotels compete to augment services for guests. The number of hotel workers giving strike mandates grows daily across the province, showing the determination of this group of highly exploited, mostly immigrant, workers to improve working conditions and job security.

While hotels are trying to use management staff to fill in for the strikers, they have been forced to curtail some services as a result of the job actions.



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