

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 July 2008

Latin America

Chile: striking bank employees battle police

On July 17, Chilean special police used water cannon and teargas to evict striking bank employees surrounding the head office of the Santander-Banefe Bank in Santiago, Chile's largest commercial bank. The 700 striking workers, mostly women, resisted strongly, holding hands and chanting. Union leaders interceded and managed to negotiate a retreat by the police.

The strike began on July 3. Negotiations have been very difficult because of management's refusal to negotiate workers' wage demands. Most of the strikers earn US\$100 per month. Since the strike began, four union leaders have been injured by police and security guards. One female employee was sexually victimized during a mass arrest.

Bolivia: Workers' confederation launches national strike

The Bolivian Labor Confederation (COB) will launch a national strike this week to demand the passage of new pension legislation. President Evo Morales had vetoed the legislation and announced his intention to introduce a competing law. He denounced the pension law because it would generate an "unacceptable government deficit" and did not favor other sectors, such as temporary employees, selfemployed workers and peasants. Morales promised that his proposal would improve on the COB-backed plan.

The law favored by the COB seeks to lower the retirement age from 65 to 60 for men and from 55 to 50 for women, to eliminate private management of pensions and to create a public agency to administer pensions.

Colombia: Coal miners strike

Miners employed by the Drummond Coal Mine, owned by a US transnational, went on strike last Thursday. The workers are calling for better wages and greater safety measures. Their demands include a wage

increase exceeding 5.69 percent, the national rate of inflation. Miners report that management has rejected the union's demands and refuses to negotiate.

A company spokesperson confirmed that the Pribbenow open pit mine has been shut down by the strike. The mine, owned by the Birmingham, Alabama-based coal giant, produces 2 million tons of coal each month, mostly for export to the US.

In a US District Court case last year, Drummond's Colombian subsidiary was accused of arranging and financing the assassinations of three union leaders in Colombia in 2001. The suit, filed by the United Steelworkers (USW) and the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF)—representing families of the victims—contended that Drummond had given material assistance to the paramilitary groups in exchange for the murder of the union leaders. An Alabama jury acquitted Drummond in July 2007, with legal analysts saying it was very difficult to prove clear connections between the company and the paramilitary groups.

United States

Tentative agreement in Pennsylvania steel lockout

The United Steelworkers (USW) and negotiators for Latrobe Specialty Steel Co. reached a tentative agreement July 18 in the month-and-a-half-long work stoppage affecting 350 workers at the company's Pennsylvania plant. Workers first struck the steelmaker on May 1 after rejecting a company demand for a two-tier wage system. The company also offered a \$16,000 lump-sum payment spread over a three-year contract instead of a wage increase. On May 9, the strike turned into a lockout when the company refused to accept the USW's offer of a return to work and Latrobe hired replacement workers.

Exact details of the new agreement were not available, but the original company demand for a two-tier wage scale would have paid new hires 20 percent less than current workers. The union was expected to put the new agreement to a vote over the weekend.

Hawaii newspaper workers stage protest

Workers at Hawaii's largest daily newspaper held a rally Friday to protest layoffs and demand a fair contract. On July 16, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, owned by Gannett Corporation, announced it would cut 54 jobs in departments including classifieds, editorials, advertising and dispatch.

Demonstrators held their rally outside the paper's main offices and chanted, "One, two, three, four, take back the 54!" The layoffs and rally marked the second day of a new round of contract talks between the *Advertiser* and six of its unions. The company wants to limit pay raises to 1 percent starting in October and allow for a one-time 1.5 percent bonus while at the same time increasing the cost of medical premiums for workers.

The layoffs violated past union contract terms because they were supposed to affect workers with the lowest seniority first. The company is also required to notify the unions before implementing layoffs.

Canada

Montreal hotel workers strike

In the first of what could be a wave of strikes against Quebec hotels, 280 workers at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Montreal walked off the job July 19. Workers at four other major hotels in the Montreal area have given their union strike mandates over the past week, as have thousands of hotel workers in the province of Quebec over the past month.

The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the union representing hotel workers, is bargaining for new contracts for 5,500 workers at 40 hotels in the province. A number of bargaining units have staged limited job actions over the past month.

Workers want improvements in wages and benefits. They also cite increased workloads and a lack of staffing as concerns.

Rolling walkouts are to be held over the next month at numerous hotels in the Toronto area, which are also in contract negotiations. In the latest job action, workers at the Radisson Suite Hotel in Toronto staged a strike last week.



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