

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 August 2008

Latin America

Bolivian tin miners demand pension reform

Miners at the Huanuni tin mine, Bolivia's largest, walked off their jobs on August 1 to protest what they called the government's "lack of will" to pass a new pension law. Guido Mitma, Executive Secretary of the Union Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers (FSTMB), said the strike is of indefinite duration and that miners across Bolivia are poised to join the Huanuni miners' strike and block roads.

The Huanuni strike is part of a general strike called by the Bolivian Labor Federation (COB) to press for pension reform. The strike has failed to garner widespread support, except for teachers and a layer of miners. The unions are demanding congress approve legislation drafted by the COB that would pool private pension funds into a government fund, a measure opposed by President Evo Morales.

Chile: Bank employees strike

A strike by seven hundred employees of Santander Banefe bank in Santiago—owned by Spain's Santander Holding company and one of Chile's most powerful financial institutions—ended August 1. During the walkout, the strikers—mostly women—defended their picket lines against the Santiago police and private police hired by the bank.

Under conditions in which the strike remained isolated—due to the indifference of the Chilean unions—the strikers managed to hold on for 28 days, making the struggle the longest bank strike in Chile in forty years. In July strikers occupying bank facilities faced sexual assault and several were hospitalized. In the end the strikers accepted a management offer that did not raise their base wages. Instead the strikers agreed to a return to work bonus of between 400-650,000 pesos (US\$900 to \$1,300.)

Truckers strike in Colombia

Colombian truck owner-operators went on strike last Thursday to demand higher hauling fees to protect their

income from rising fuel prices. Nemesi Castillo, President of the Colombian Truckers Association, declared over the weekend that there had been no agreement with the Labor Ministry, prompting the Association to intensify the struggle. "We intend to paralyze 98 percent of vehicles next week, some 145,000 trucks," said Castillo.

This is the second truckers strike in Colombia in a month and a half. The earlier strike ended when Colombian President Alvaro Uribe promised to subsidize the truckers. Strikers point out that no substantial change came from that agreement.

United States

Kansas aircraft workers vote to strike

Members of the International Association of Machinists District 70 voted by 80 percent to reject the latest proposal by aerospace company Hawker Beechcraft Corporation and then voted by 90 percent to strike the company starting August 4. The leadership of the union called the last proposal substandard and recommended that the 4,700 workers at the company's Wichita, Kansas plant and another 500 at Salina reject the offer.

Hawker Beechcraft offered the union four percent annual wage increases over the course of a three-year agreement. But the proposal still leaves workers, such as assemblers, receiving wages that are \$2.30 an hour less than those received by their counterparts at Cessna Aircraft Company. No new talks were scheduled and the old agreement expired August 3.

Among the issues that aggravated workers were proposals that would cut earned time off for new hires, downgrade two job codes that also affected new hires and hidden costs that would be added to the health care package. One worker, Terri Holloway, told the *Wichita Eagle*, "If we don't fight for the new people, they're going to get the old people next."

Tentative agreement for Alaska national park bus drivers

The Teamsters union and Aramark Corporation reached a tentative agreement July 30 that puts off a strike by 122 bus drivers who chaperone tourists at the Denali National Park. Teamsters Local 959 President Rick Boyles indicated the union would hold a ratification vote this week but would not provide details of the new agreement until two weeks had passed.

Aramark, a Philadelphia-based company, has a partnership with the Alaska Native regional corporation to provide lodging, transportation and other services to the thousands of tourists who visit the park every day. In the 1990s, when Aramark first took over the operation, they slashed drivers' pay from \$16 an hour to \$8-9 an hour. Currently, the corporation is challenging an arbitrator's decision that requires the company to raise wages and provide drivers with back pay.

Unions negotiate past deadline at Verizon

Two unions representing 65,000 telecommunication workers at Verizon have agreed to continue negotiations, ignoring an overwhelming vote by union members to strike if no agreement was reached over the weekend.

Officials from the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers claim progress has been made in talks with the telecommunication giant.

Verizon executives are demanding that current and retired union workers accept massive health and pension concessions as well as greater flexibility to cut jobs and move workers.



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