Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site *invites workers and other readers to* contribute *to this regular feature.*

Panama: Restaurant workers protest union-busting

Employees of the Metropolitan Restaurant, located in the headquarters of the Public Health Insurance Administration, are engaged in a sit-down strike at the Metropolitan Cafeteria Complex in Panama City. The workers, members of the Panamanian Restaurant Employees Union (SUTRAP), are demanding better wages, working conditions, and an end to union-busting by the restaurant. The strike began December 18. At a press conference on December 17, SUTRAP leader Alba Pedrol described substandard conditions at the restaurant, including lack of cooking equipment and low wages, pointing out that workers with 27 years of service are still only paid minimum wage.

Panama: Retired workers demand increase in pensions

The Association of Independent Retirees (AJI) rejected draft legislation that raises to US$60 a periodic pension bonus. The draft law provides for two half yearly bonuses. AJI leader Eladio Fernandez pointed out that Panama's constitution provides for three bonuses instead of two. Fernandez also declared that the retired workers are demanding a US$25 increase in monthly pensions and that AJI would continue to lead protests toward that goal. Panamanian retired workers have been protesting in downtown Panama City since December 16, following an announcement by the government of President Martín Torrijos to issue a US$25 Christmas bonus to retirees. At the time, AJI leaders declared that retirees' needs go way beyond the Christmas holiday and that they need the increase to pay for rising food and medication costs. The retired workers are demanding that the increase be financed, not by the Social Security Institute, but by fees from ships that cross the Panama Canal. AJI represents nearly 200,000 retired workers, most of whom receive a paltry monthly stipend of about US$170.

Mexico: Cananea copper miners win court decision, strike continues

On December 11 a Mexican Federal Labor court invalidated a decision by the Arbitration and Conciliation Service of the Labor Ministry that had declared "inexistent" the 16-month-long strike by 1,100 copper miners at the Cananea open pit mine in Sonora State.

The strike, led by the National Union of Mining and Metal Workers (SNTMMS), began on June 30, 2007. At issue is the return and exoneration of exiled SNTMMS leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, who was removed from union leadership by former Mexican President Vicente Fox and charged with embezzling union funds.

The latest court decision does not settle the matter of the legality of the strike, however. Further court hearings are expected in January. Cananea's corporate owner, Grupo México, argues that the workers should be forced to return to work due to the political nature of the strike.

Pending the resolution of the case, an SNTMMS spokesperson announced that the miners intended to continue blocking the entrances to the mine. The Cananea copper mine, is the largest copper mine in Mexico and third largest in the world.

North Carolina: Rally to support Moncure Plywood strikers

Over 80 people rallied in Pittsboro, North Carolina, in support of the more than 100 machinists who have been on strike against Moncure Plywood for more than five months. The company's last contract offer would mandate 60-hour workweeks, increase health insurance premiums, and provide fewer holidays. In addition, the offer would weaken the seniority clause, potentially leading to favoritism, discrimination and racism.

Racism is a particular concern for the many African-American workers at Moncure Plywood. While on strike they have endured abuses such as a clearly visible noose being hung inside the plant gates. The company threatened to sue the strikers for trespass if they crossed onto its property to remove the noose. The noose stayed up for three days until community activists entered the property to remove it. Moncure Plywood has also pitted minority groups against each other by replacing the union workers with primarily Latino workers laid off after a plant closing in nearby

Siler City.

Teachers in Lehman Township, Penn. begin strike

After nearly three years without a contract, 151 teachers from the Lake-Lehman School District went on strike in single-digit temperatures on December 22, seeking better pay, health care and tuition reimbursement assistance. If no agreement is reached, they will return to the picket lines January 5.

The teachers have gone on strike each year since their contract expired in 2006. Pennsylvania law only allows teachers to strike two times in one school year, limiting the number of strike days so that students meet state-mandated attendance requirements. The school board has used the poor economy in an attempt to turn public opinion against the teachers.

Kansas City drivers strike ends

Drivers for United Beverage Company in Kansas City, Missouri ended their two-week strike December 15 on company terms. The 28 drivers, who deliver Budweiser in downtown Kansas City, had been seeking to obtain similar pay and benefits as two other Budweiser distributors in the area.

Teamsters Local 838 negotiator Richard Blevins calculated that workers would have to deliver an additional 35,000 to 70,000 cases of beer on a yearly basis if they were to try to maintain past pay standards.

14-Month lockout ends at Petro-Canada

Two hundred and sixty locked-out oil refinery workers, members of Local 175 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP) voted overwhelmingly to accept a new contract last week ending a bitter 14-month dispute. The workers, employees of Petro Canada's east end Montreal oil refinery, were locked out by the company in November of 2007. Prior to the lockout, they had been working without a contract since January 2007.

Over the past several weeks, former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard mediated between the company and the union to produce an agreement. The three-year deal provides for a 14 percent raise over the life of the contract plus a $4,000 signing bonus. All charges arising from the labour dispute are to be dropped.

Petro Canada was demanding that the traditional three-year agreement be extended to six years. Since safety clauses are crucial in a refining industry subject to rapid technological development, the longer contract term would have allowed the company to fast-track employees into higher risk jobs without adequate safety protection written into the contract. The settlement provides for an automatic extension of the collective agreement when it expires in 2010 based on the union's national energy bargaining pattern that is achieved at the company's Edmonton refinery in the next bargaining round.

Eighteen months ago, the membership voted to authorize the union leadership to call a strike. However, the negotiators for the local opted to continue bargaining even while the company began training their managers in September to run the refinery. Once this replacement workforce was fully trained, Petro-Canada, the fourth largest oil company in the country, made the decision to implement their lockout strategy.

With the price of oil skyrocketing, Petro-Canada's two refineries have proven to be cash cows for the company. About 13 percent of Canada's refining capacity is accounted for in the two facilities. The company was able to maintain production quotas at the Montreal facility using the managerial replacements.

Unwilling to mobilize the working class in the Montreal area, let alone the unionized workers at Petro-Canada's Edmonton refinery, and with the lockout nearing its first anniversary, with support from the Canadian Labour Congress and the Quebec Federation of Labour, the union launched a boycott campaign against the company's extensive network of gasoline filling stations across the country. The campaign barely registered in Petro-Canada's sales figures for the period.