

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 March 2009

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

Five-day strike by Brazilian oil workers

On Friday, employees of Petrobras, the Brazilian state-owned oil company, ended a five-day strike on the basis of a last minute settlement after the workers had made it clear that the strike would continue this week.

The agreement still needs to be ratified by the workers, but the oil workers federation (FUP) claimed victory over Petrobras management and indicated that the workers would approve a new agreement on profit-sharing. As a result of this agreement, workers will receive a one-time profit sharing bonus on May 5. The company also promised that there would be no retaliatory measures against strikers and their supporters.

Petrobras management did not comment on the agreement, but insisted that use of non-union back-up crews allowed it to maintain production. Had the strike lasted another week, however, it is doubtful if the overworked back-ups could have maintained production. FUP officials criticized the use of back-ups, composed of managers and supervisors, declaring that the crews did not have enough personnel and that they were poorly trained.

Some FUP members continued working at the President Getulio Vargas refinery during the strike as a result of side agreements with FUP locals in Paraná and Santa Catarina.

The strikers will lose five days of wages.

Colombian coal miners strike to protest death of fellow worker

Miners at the Pribbenow de Drummond coal mine in

Colombia walked off their jobs last Monday over safety conditions following the death of a fellow miner, Dagoberto Clavijo Barranco. Nine thousand workers went on strike for four days. The mine is the second largest in Colombia.

Clavijo, 23, was a temporary worker employed by a Drummond subcontractor. He had been working at the mine for a few weeks. He was killed as he was operating the vehicle that sprays water on the mine's rails to keep down the dust. The machine appears to have gone out of control and crashed. Strikers pointed to a lack of proper safety equipment and preventive safety measures and said Clavijo had been insufficiently trained to operate the vehicle.

SINTRAMIENERGÉTICA, the union that represents the Drummond miners, indicated that vehicle maintenance at the mine was substandard and demanded that Clavijo's family be granted the death benefits that correspond to full-time workers employed directly by the firm. The union also demanded better safety conditions and greater job security. Drummond insisted that the strike was illegal.

Out of the 9,000 miners at this facility, half are full-time permanent employees. The other half, like Clavijo, work for temporary agencies.

Joaquín Romero, president of the miners' union, claimed that the miners spontaneously decided to lift the strike even though the company had not agreed to any of the union's demands. A mine spokesperson said that the miners who ended the strike "understood the negative impact of the strike on the company, the nation, the region and the families that depend on the mines for their livelihood."

In July 2008 workers went on strike for eight days at the same mine over wages and working conditions.

Communications workers union expels New Jersey official

A Communications Workers of America internal union tribunal unanimously expelled former CWA New Jersey state President Carla Katz last week on grounds of

mismanaging the union's largest state local and ordered her to repay \$138,000 in funds used for personal and political expenses.

The tribunal found her guilty of, among other things: using union funds to pay people helping her to run against a union rival for a regional vice-president position; getting paid as a full-time local president, despite working only 2-5 hours per week; billing "law school expenses, including text books, tuition and fees" to the union; conducting back-channel discussions with Governor Jon Corzine during 2006-2007 state labor contract negotiations; approving hundreds of thousands of dollars in unauthorized union contributions to politicians, including \$20,800 to Newark Mayor Cory Booker; orchestrating the suspension of a dissident Local 1034 vice president; alerting state officials that a union opponent was campaigning against her election as a district vice president. The opponent was subsequently disciplined by officials of the New Jersey Labor Department.

Katz indicated she would challenge the suspension at the upcoming CWA convention.

Despite the gravity of the findings, the CWA declined to make the tribunal's decision available to its membership. It was only because of a leak to the *Star-Ledger* that the findings became public.

Striking North Carolina machinists to vote on new contract proposal

Striking members of the machinists union at Moncure Plywood were set to vote March 30 on whether to accept a new three-year agreement and end their seven-month strike. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local W369 bargaining committee issued a unanimous recommendation to ratify the new agreement with the company, which operates out of Moncure, North Carolina.

Moncure originally insisted on mandatory seven-day work weeks, the elimination of long-standing seniority protections and other changes in contract language. According to an IAM news release, the "new contract is a dramatic improvement over the original offer." It did not provide details.

Ontario home care workers strike

Three thousand personal support workers (PSW) employed by the Red Cross across the province began rotating strike action on March 24 with a one-day strike in the Sudbury region of central Ontario. The job actions will ultimately affect 22 communities.

The workers, who are represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have been without a contract since last July. At that time they voted overwhelmingly for strike action.

The majority of workers provide in-home care to patients. They are paid as little as 60 percent of the wages of PSWs in nursing homes. As a consequence, many live below the poverty line.

In addition to wages, the issue of how work hours are calculated is central in the dispute. Wages range from \$14 (Canadian) per hour to as low as \$11 per hour. Many workers travel up to 100 kilometers a day, but they are not paid for the time between appointments.

The Red Cross said the union gave assurances that the neediest patients would continue to be served. The SEIU has stated that changes introduced by the Ontario Liberal government are responsible for the dire situation facing home health workers in the province, and has called on Premier Dalton McGuinty to work with them to address the crisis.



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