Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Colombia: Railroad strike paralyzes coal transport

On April 3, 600 workers employed by the Colombia Northern Railway (FENOCO) walked off their jobs. The railway moves coal from mines to the port. At issue are workers' demands that the company recognize the union and increase their wages.

Felix Herrera, president of the National Union of Railroad Workers, indicated that the company had refused to negotiate.

FENOCO transports 130,000 tons of coal from mines owned by Drummond and Glencore in the Department of Cesar. Drummond and Glencore are the two largest coal producers in Colombia.

Mexico: Strike at the University of Sonora

The Union of Workers and Employees of the University of Sonora (STEUS) led a walkout at that institution on April 3 over an impasse with management on wage negotiations. STEUS leader Dorotea Gascón Gámez indicated that the Sonora employees rejected a 4.5 percent wage offer. Instead, they are demanding a 25 percent raise in yearly salary. Sonora University has campuses in Hermosillo, Navajoa, Santa Ana, Caborca and Nogales. It educates some 30,000 students yearly.

Mexico: Coahuila miners' strike enters its third month

Workers at the Peñoles mine, members of Section 64 of the National Miners Union, rallied in protest at the municipal building in Torreon to raise awareness about their strike and to press their wage demands. Joining them in the protest were members of the telephone workers and other local unions.

Miner leader Daniel Cossio said that the workers are demanding a 13 percent raise in wages and benefits. Cossio indicated that the miners are willing to negotiate these demands, but management's representatives have yet to negotiate with the strikers. The company is only offering 7 percent in wages and benefits, and a 1 percent one-time bonus. The strike began in February when the 344 Peñoles workers walked off their jobs.

At last Thursday's rally, workers chanted, "Yes to the strike and not one step backwards!"

Argentina: Teachers' strike

Teachers in the Patagonian province of Río Negro decided on April 4 to continue their seven-week strike and barricades of highways, which began on February 23, to press for their wage demands. In doing so the teachers defied an order by the Superior Courts of the province that had ordered the lifting of the strike.

The Rio Negro teachers, who earn a minimum wage of approximately $500 a month, are demanding a cost-of-living raise and that the school district pay them for the 41 days on strike.

Chile: Striking teachers confront police

Striking public school teachers confronted police last Thursday in Santiago de Chile. The strikers were protesting a new education law approved by the Senate the day before,

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which allows university professors from any subject to teach in public schools for five years without a teaching credential. The 3,000 teachers marched and rallied in Plaza de Armas in the city center accompanied by students who support their strike. In the ensuing melee 47 people were arrested, including three teachers leaders. Five police were injured.

It appears that the confrontation began when a group of masked provocateurs threw projectiles at the police.

Following the confrontation, the teachers marched on the Moneda Palace, Chile's government house, where they presented a petition letter. "The proposed changes will increase job insecurity in our industry," declared Jaime Gajardo, leader of the teachers' union, arguing, "Professionals must not only be acquainted with the subject matter, but must know how to teach."

Kansas City construction strike ends with tentative agreement

The union representing 600 cement finishers in Kansas City, Missouri announced it had reached a deal with the Builders Association April 3 and ended a one-day strike that had shut down large-scale construction across the city. Members of the Cement Masons Local 518 will vote on the new proposal April 10.

According to reports, the strike came as a surprise since both ironworkers and the carpenters' union had reached deals with the Builders Association. The two sides apparently deadlocked over wages and the insistence by cement workers that the contract be four years in length.

No details were available about the agreement that brought the strike to an end. As a part of the deal, officials of the cement workers' union agreed to pull down picket lines and will recommend the tentative agreement to workers. Support for the strike among other building trades workers was solid, as work on jobs such as the Truman Sports Complex and the Performing Arts Center were brought to a complete halt.

Machinists strike Ohio manufacturer

Workers at SK Hand Tools in Defiance, Ohio went out on strike March 31 after unanimously rejecting the company's demands for concessions totaling $1.2 million. The 70 members of the International Association of Machinists, who have gone seven years without a wage increase, faced demands for wage cuts of 16 percent in the first year and an additional 7.5 percent in the second year of the proposed contract. Vacation would be slashed from five weeks to two. Benefits such as life insurance, short-term disability, sick and accident pay would be completely eliminated.

British Columbia paramedics on strike

Three thousand five hundred ambulance paramedics represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) went on strike April 1, and other unions in the province are pledging to honor their picket lines. Although 911 services will be maintained under essential service legislation, the strikers will be allowed to refuse administrative and other types of work.

The paramedics rejected a last-minute bid by the provincial health minister to avert a strike with a contract extension. The key issues are vehicle shortages and job security as well as wage parity with other emergency professionals, such as Vancouver police officers. Their employer, the B.C. Ambulance Service, is offering a 3 percent wage increase in a one-year deal. The union is asking for at least a 4 percent annual increase in a seven-year deal to bring them in line with similar workers in the province.

Red Cross workers join job action

Home care workers at Red Cross continued their job action this week, with 130 workers in Burlington, Ontario, east of Toronto, staging a one-day strike after similar action by workers in the towns of Sudbury, Owen Sound, Peterborough and Lindsay last week.

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