

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: Customs employees strike

Panamanian customs employees carried out a 48-hour strike June 24 and 25 over wages and job security. The strike ended after the government promised to make permanent the jobs of 197 temporary workers. In addition, the government of President Torrijos promised to budget US\$1.5 million toward future wage increases. Edgardo Goytier, president of the union that represents customs workers, declared the strike a success because all the customs offices in Panama were shut down. The strike involved 1,200 workers.

Juvani Ferrari, president of the Association of the Colon Free Trade Zone, denounced the strikers for having carried out a surprise strike. "I am opposed to wildcat strikes that do not give companies the opportunity to achieve a compromise," he said. Ferrari estimated that the Colon Free Trade Zone, located 80 kilometers north of Panama City, lost US\$100 million over the two days.

Goytier rejected Ferrari's remarks. "This strike was our last option," he said, "following 30 years during which workers were abused and fired for no cause in the customs agency, where there has not been any job security even though our members are professional employees."

Teachers from 13 states protest in Mexico City

On June 26, 2,000 teachers belonging to the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), together with supporters from the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples (APPO), marched through downtown Mexico City. The CNTE represents a dissident faction within the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE).

The purpose of the march was to press the government of President Felipe Calderon to resolve hundreds of grievances presented by the teachers last May. CNTE leader Daniel Avila indicated that the teachers opposed the so-called Alliance for Quality Education, a government program that blames the teachers for any failure in the educational system. SNTE leader and congresswoman Alba Esther Gordillo, a notoriously corrupt union bureaucrat, supports the Alliance for Quality Education.

Teachers from Oaxaca led the march with the support of teachers from 13 Mexican states and from the APPO. When the march approached the offices of the Ministry of Government they were confronted by a security detail. The marchers desisted from marching on the president's mansion at Los Pinos. Avila said that the teachers intend to set up a permanent protest site at Mexico City's main square, El Zócalo.

Peruvian miners protest mine closure

Thirty-five hundred miners from the Doe Run Mine, in northern Peru, blocked a central highway that connects Lima with the Andean region and the Amazonian jungle. The workers are protesting management's decision to close the La Oroya Metallurgic Complex. The plant is owned by Doe Run, a division of the Renco Group in the United States. Doe Run has also owned a copper mine in the city of

Huancavélica since 1998. In addition to copper, it produces lead, zinc, silver, and gold, plus sulfuric acid and indium.

Doe Run announced June 3 that it was closing the facility due to a lack of essential supplies. The workers think that the closure is a pretext to pressure the government of President Alan Garcia to make financial concessions to the company. In particular, Doe Run wants an extension in carrying out government-mandated environmental reforms.

Rhode Island carpenters ends three-day strike

Striking carpenters ratified a new two-year agreement June 25 covering some 400 members of Local 94 who work for companies under the Rhode Island Chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America. Workers had initially rejected a four-year agreement by an overwhelming 400-1 margin.

While details are sketchy, the new two-year agreement calls for annual increases of \$1.50 and \$1.75 an hour that will cover health care costs and “minimal, if any, wage hikes,” said a union statement. The statement went on to say, “We understand the financial troubles that are currently impacting the construction industry. That is why we worked so hard to negotiate a reasonable agreement...”

Meanwhile, the union continues to strike against heavy and highway contractors. The old agreement expired on June 7.

New talks scheduled in two-week strike against Texas helicopter manufacturer

Talks are scheduled to resume July 1 in the strike by 2,400 workers at the Fort Worth manufacturing facilities of Bell Helicopter, where the V-22 Osprey and H-1 military helicopters are fabricated. Both sides agreed to a resumption of talks after prompting by a federal mediator.

The strike began on June 15 after workers defied a

recommendation by the United Auto Workers Local 218 leadership to ratify a new contract that, despite wage increases, would outsource 44 janitorial jobs and increase healthcare costs.

Meanwhile, talks between UAW Local 317, which represents 339 white-collar workers, continued despite a contract expiration this past weekend. Two other smaller unions, representing 56 fire protection workers and 174 production engineers, will expire in August.

Oklahoma Air Force base strike settled

Aircraft mechanics at Vance Air Force Base in Enid, Oklahoma voted by a 550-155 margin to end their two-week strike June 22 and accept a new agreement reached by the International Association of Machinists Local 898 with CSC Applied Technologies LLC. The new agreement supposedly removed company demands over issues such as wages and seniority that in part provoked the strike.

Also included in the new agreement were annual increases of 3.75 percent on wages and 20 cents per hour on pensions. However, there was no mention of forced overtime. In 2008 CSC Applied Technologies laid off 23 percent of its workforce and then implemented a forced overtime policy, provoking deep worker discontent.



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