Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Iron miners on strike at Peru's largest mine

The strike by 1,200 iron miners at the Shougang iron mine, Peru's largest, will enter its second week this Monday. The main issue of the job action is wages. Negotiations are at an impasse. Last July, the miners struck and won wage increases ranging from 18 to 27 percent of base pay. However management has not lived up to its side of the agreement, forcing the miners to strike once again.

Ten-day walkout by Mexican university professors

The Union of Academic Workers at the University of Oaxaca (STAUO) in southwest Mexico ended a 10-day strike last Friday, despite unresolved issues in their dispute over wage parity with universities in the southern region of Mexico. STAOU leader Enrique Lara indicated that the professors had agreed to grant university authorities four weeks to come up with a proposal on this issue. Claiming the need for impartiality, both sides agreed to turn to an outside consultant to bridge the differences.

In the meantime, the university agreed to a 10 percent raise for the strikers.

Chile: Copper miners vote to strike

Copper miners at the Spence Copper mine in Northern Chile voted 522 to one to strike on October 8 after rejecting last Wednesday a wage offer by BHP negotiators. BHP, an Australian transnational, owns the mine. The workers are demanding a 5.5 percent raise. BHP announced that it would seek mediation by the Chilean Labor Ministry. The Spence contract is the first of several copper contracts coming up for renewal, including the one at the Escondida, the world's largest open pit copper mine, which is also owned by BHP.

In another development, striking dockworkers at the port of Antofagasta are blocking copper exports from the mines in the vicinity of the port.

Argentina: Kraft foods workers protest layoffs

Workers at the Kraft food plant in the Buenos Aires suburb of Pacheco attempted to block the Pan American Highway last Friday. They were stopped by a thick cordon of police. The workers and their supporters are campaigning for the rehiring of 86 sacked workers. Originally 162 workers had been dismissed, including the entire union leadership inside the plant. Of these, 86 agreed to early retirement.

On September 25 police and plant security expelled workers from the plant with a level of violence that brought back memories from the dictatorships of the 1970s. Women workers were forced to kneel and watch while their male colleagues were beaten. As a result of the confrontation, Kraft added 36 names to their list of suspended and fired workers. The union has accused the government of carrying out the repression against the Kraft strikers under pressure from the US embassy.

Kraft recently acquired the plant from the Argentine cookie maker Terrabusi. While management did agree to rehire 30 of the laid-off employees, none of whom are union delegates, police and plant security are aggressively patrolling the plant and preventing access to the local union leadership. Local sources have accused upper echelons of the Argentine union bureaucracy of conspiring with Kraft to remove militant delegates and impose a docile leadership at the plant.

Workers at Maryland steel mill face cuts

Workers at the Sparrows Point steel mill near Baltimore, Maryland, have been issued a draft proposal by the plant's Russian owner, Severstal, that could cut up to one-third of its workforce. Severstal, which purchased the mill for $810 million in 2008, wants to reduce the current unionized bargaining unit of 2,500 members through reductions, retirements and transfers to other departments.

Severstal's North American steel division controls five US plants that have lost heavily since last year's economic decline and is seeking to recover those losses through restructuring its operations, which could involve plant closures. Besides its operations in the United States, Severstal owns steel making plants in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, United Kingdom, France and Italy. It has mining operations in Russia and the United States.

Florida Orchestra musicians ratify concessions

Members of the Florida Orchestra accepted a modification of their contract that imposes a 5.5 percent cut in pay along with changes in pension and health benefits. The change, involving a total of $250,000 in concessions, will be implemented for the upcoming season, which was the third and last year of the Tampa Bay orchestra's current contract agreement. The modification also extends the current contract an additional two years.

The Florida Orchestra management originally demanded an 8 percent cut while the American Federation of Musicians Local 427-721 wanted to limit the cut to 5.4 percent. The current year was to have seen musicians' base pay set at $30,390. Instead it will be set back to $28,800. Pay will rise to $32,000 during the 2012 concert year.

Symphony orchestras around the United States have suffered pay cuts as high as 19 percent as the economic downturn hits cultural organizations. Reduced government and corporate funding and uncertain ticket sales due to the recession are affecting budgets.

Manitoba Hydro workers on strike

Over 3,000 workers with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) went on strike against government-owned Manitoba Hydro on October 3 after conciliation talks broke off the same day and workers rejected the latest company offer.

The strikers have been without a contract since April. Another 1,600 workers in two other unions whose contracts have also expired are in negotiations with the same company. In the first strike in the local's 50-year history, the main demands are for improvements in wages and a shorter contract.

Managers have been training for weeks and are now doing the work of the strikers. Although some services have been deliberately suspended because of the strike, according to a Hydro spokesman, there has been no disruption in operations.

New Brunswick city workers locked out

Twenty-seven municipal workers in Woodstock, New Brunswick, were locked out October 1 by negotiators for the town after last-minute talks failed to produce an agreement.

Those affected include road maintenance workers and firefighters, with four workers designated as being in essential services. Although talks between the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents the workers, and the town had been ongoing for six months, at least four outstanding issues remain unresolved, the most critical of which is workers' pensions.