

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 December 2009

Striking Mexican miners fear government repression

Striking miners at the Cananea copper mine in Sonora, Mexico, as well as their fellow strikers at the Taxco and Sombrerete mines in the states of Guerrero and Zacatecas, have been inundated with propaganda leaflets that they believe were issued by the transnational mining company *Grupo México* and the Mexican Government.

The leaflets blame Miners and Metal Workers Union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutía for strikers not having salaries, or Christmas bonuses, or benefits. The leaflet recommends that the miners accept a severance package, consisting of three months' pay, 12 days of pay for each year worked at the mine, and a seniority bonus.

The strikers suspect that this propaganda campaign is part of preparations to bring in troops to violently evict the striking miners. Mine union official Sergio Beltrán Reyes pointed to attacks on the Electrical Workers Union and a recent declaration by a spokesperson of the Mexican Mine Chamber—who stated, “these strikes will soon be ended”—as signs of impending violence against the miners.

The miners have been on strike since June 30, 2007. They are demanding the return of their leader, Gómez Urrutia, who is presently exiled in Canada and faces charges of embezzlement of union funds. The miners' leader was removed from office by former Mexican President Vicente Fox in 2006 following the collapse of the Pasta de Conchos coal mine, which killed 65 miners.

Chile: Xstrata smelter workers vote to strike

Workers at Xstrata's Altonorte Copper smelter in Chile voted to strike December 18 after rejecting a management contract proposal. More than 94 percent of the 274 unionized workers voted in favor of a walkout, according to union officials.

Management is calling for government mediation, which would last five business days and could be extended. Union officials said the company has failed to meet their demands on wages and benefits.

No talks as strike at Illinois manufacturing plant enters third month

There have yet to be any talks as a strike of workers at PAL Health Technologies in Pekin, Illinois, enters its third month. The company, an orthotics manufacturer, and the 61 members of Laborers Local 231 have been unable to come to an agreement over wages, benefits and absenteeism. The strike began on October 3.

As the result of not getting paid for more than two months and being unable to cover their bills, some strikers' cars have been repossessed and others have seen their electricity shut off. Cathy Martin, who has 21 years at the plant, told the Bloomington & Normal Trades & Labor Assembly website, “When I started out it was fantastic. You could get time off for family needs. We don't have any fun anymore—no Christmas parties, nothing. We were told we were family. He (owner Jeff Schoenfeld) says he's taking care of his ‘family,’ but he's not taking care of his ‘family’ now.”

A large number of the workers make wages under \$15 an hour. Since the start of the strike, PAL Health Technologies has held a “job fair” at which it advertised wages of \$19 an hour and a \$100 signing bonus for workers who agreed to work the strike-bound

plant.

Broadway theatre cleaners and porters to vote on settlement

Workers who clean Broadway theaters in New York City are set to vote on an agreement reached last week with owners and producers.

The deal includes raises along with improved health care benefits and pensions, according to Service Employees International Union Local 32B-J, the bargaining agent for the 240 cleaners and porters. The workers, who currently make \$16 an hour, must still vote on the agreement. Employees have not had a raise since 2006.

The agreement covers workers at 30 theatres. The Broadway League, the theatre management association, praised the tentative contract. Workers were set to strike December 31, if a settlement was not reached.

Deal reached in driving examiners' strike

A four-month strike by driving examiners in Ontario could end if the 590 DriveTest workers ratify a tentative deal.

As a consequence of the strike, few new drivers' licenses or renewals of existing licenses that require tests have been issued. Managers, who have filled in over the last two months, are now processing some applications. No details of the proposed deal have yet been made public, but the outstanding issues included wages, benefits and full-time staffing levels.

Workers could be back on the job in early January, although in November they rejected a deal put to them by their union, the United Steelworkers.

Museum strike ends

The 86-day strike by workers at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, and the War Museum across the river in Ottawa came to an end last week when workers voted to accept a new contract.

The 400 workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada, which is hailing the new deal as a victory. The new contract reportedly includes improvements in wages and job security, although temporary, full-time workers will not get the same protections.



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