

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 January 2010

## Chilean copper miners protest over wages and bonuses

The 5,500 miners employed at the Chuquicamata mine in northern Chile are poised to strike this week over wages and bonuses. CODELCO, Chile's national copper company, owns this giant open pit mine. On December 28, miners voted to reject a government offer of a 3.8 percent wage hike and an extraordinary bonus of US \$23,000. They are demanding an increase of more than 5 percent and a signing bonus of 15 to 18 million pesos (US\$30,000-36,000). CODELCO's proposed bonus was contingent on the miners' approval of the offer by December 31. It has now been withdrawn.

The strike is expected to have a significant impact on world copper prices. Chuquicamata produces 550,000 tons yearly, 4 percent of the world's copper.

Last week, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet asked the miners not to strike; no one would benefit, she argued, and the national wealth would be damaged.

Francisco Tomic, CODELCO's corporate vice president, declared that the company's offer is at the "ethical limit" of what the country can afford. Higher wages for the miners would require the government take away resources from the nation's poor, declared Tomic.

The strike will take place less than two weeks before the runoff elections between presidential candidates Eduardo Frei and Sebastián Piñera.

## Mexican government blacklists sacked electricians

Tens of thousands of fired Mexican electrical utility workers have been barred from finding work. Their jobs were terminated by the government of President Felipe Calderón on October 11 when it shut down Central Power and Light (LyFC), the electrical utility that provided Mexico City and central Mexico with power. LyFC was closed in a military operation when, at midnight October 11, over 6,000 Mexican troops surrounded the company's headquarters and plants and expelled the workers.

An article published on December 28 in the Mexican daily *La Jornada* quoted Eduardo Cortés Carrasco, a sacked worker with 19 years seniority as a white-collar employee. "It is a veritable witch-hunt," declared Cortés. "We are denied jobs wherever we go." Initially, Cortés had accepted a government severance package and, up to now, had not participated in the conflict between the Electrical Utility Workers Union (SME) and the Mexican government. He has now joined the SME campaign to reopen LyFC.

Cortés' experience has been confirmed by *La Jornada* and other Mexican newspapers. Workers who apply for jobs openings—in private and public companies alike—have been told that they cannot expect to be hired until the end of the Calderón presidency, a three-year blacklist. "We receive a treatment that is worse than what ex-convicts receive," said Cortés.

When LyFC was liquidated government officials promised workers who voluntarily accepted the government severance package that they would be given jobs elsewhere, but that has not happened.

LyFC's shutdown aggravated the country's employment crisis. Since 2006, unemployment in Mexico has increased by 83 percent. A recent report by the government labor statistical agency INEGI indicates that nearly 20 million Mexicans are unemployed or underemployed, nearly one in three workers.

The INEGI report shows that only 30 percent of Mexican workers enjoy a stable, full-time job, with

social security benefits and legally recognized labor rights.

### **Talks to resume in Kentucky factory strike**

Negotiations are scheduled to resume January 5 in the three-week-old strike at TruSeal Technologies in Barbourville, Kentucky. United Steelworkers Local 8411 struck the manufacturer of window components December 16 after workers voted by a 153-0 margin to reject the company's demand for concessions on insurance premiums, attendance bonuses, 401(k) retirement benefits, overtime and work schedules.

"They are trying to use the recession to tear our contracts apart," Local 8411 member Danny Sams told the Corbin, Kentucky *Times-Tribune*. Negotiations were suspended on December 19 while picketing continued through the holidays.

Local 8411 has charged TruSeal with unfair labor practices for interrogating employees about their union activities. According to the *Times-Tribune*, "TruSeal is a part of Quanex Corporation, a publicly held company whose one-year investor return is currently over 100 percent." The Barbourville plant makes insulating glass sealant spacer systems for windows and solar panels.

### **Boston airport cleaners launch wildcat strike**

Some one hundred workers who clean planes at Boston's Logan International Airport launched a 24-hour wildcat strike December 30 to protest low wages and lack of benefits from the service company Aramark Corporation. Roxanna Rivera, a negotiator for Service Employees International Union Local 615, told the *Boston Herald*, "We're saying this is worth more than \$9 an hour, with no benefits." Rivera charged that Aramark "refused to offer or even counter any of our proposals."

The janitors, who clean toilets and remove trash from

Delta and United Airlines planes, are paid between \$8 and \$9 an hour. They have gone years without a pay raise and joined the SEIU last year after learning that cleaners employed by a competitor, Massport, receive \$14 an hour.

### **Union folds Vancouver bus strike**

A strike by 500 workers at HandyDART in Vancouver, BC, which began October 29, is over after their union agreed to binding arbitration. Last week, workers voted to reject a proposed contract recommended by negotiators for the Amalgamated Transit Union.

HandyDART provides transportation service to people with disabilities. Workers had already rejected two earlier offers, the latest just before Christmas. Central issues in the dispute were pensions, treatment of casual workers and health benefits.

Although workers have begun to return to work, it is unclear when full service will resume.



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