

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 January 2010

PRD calls on Mexican citizens to boycott electricity bills

The Mexican Electrical Utility Workers union (SME) called on the government to rehire the approximately 18,000 SME that have not accepted severance payments on a temporary basis to repair a failing electrical grid. More than 40,000 workers were sacked last October when the Felipe Calderón administration shut down Luz y Fuerza del Centro (LyFC,) the electrical utility that up until then was responsible for the provision of electricity to Mexico City and central Mexico. The facilities formerly operated by LyFC are now being operated by the Federal Electric Commission (CFE.) On January 15, strong winds in central Mexico damaged electricity lines, affecting electrical service for hundreds of thousands.

As part of a campaign to force federal authorities to reach an agreement with the SME bureaucracy, the left-bourgeois Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) encouraged the establishment of a Boycott Committee that campaigns for the citizenry to refuse to pay their electricity bills. The committee points out that the CFE has no authority to collect the payments and that in some cases customers are being significantly overcharged.

The SME and the PRD carried out a protest at Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts on January 17 to promote the boycott. Despite repeated assurances that it would take strike action to fight the sackings, the SME bureaucracy has so far limited the mobilization of its members to street protests.

Mexican cement workers walk out

Six Hundred Mexican cement workers employed by the Cruz Azul cement company went on strike January 15. All 40 of the company's plants are being picketed. The daily newspaper *El Sol de Toluca* spoke to Martín Velázquez, a Cruz Azul employee. Velázquez denounced the company, saying it had cut his wages by over 30 percent over a six-month period. Velázquez also indicated that the workday is excessive and that workers are denied overtime pay. In the past, workers who complained have been threatened with termination.

The strikers also demand the decertification of the union that supposedly represents them, saying "it is a 'charro' [company] union, at the service of bosses, not of the workers."

Grupo México hiring scabs against striking copper miners

The Mexican Metal Workers' Union has said that the transnational copper giant Grupo México is hiring strikebreakers in Nacozari, Sonora state. The strikebreakers are to be sent to the Cananea open pit copper mine, also in Sonora, to replace striking workers there. The Cananea miners have been on strike since June 2007. "Such a move would violate the basic precepts of work place harmony," declared a union spokesperson.

Union leaders suspect that the company will have no trouble obtaining a court injunction that will allow it to reopen the mine with scab labor and has launched an appeal to the Federal Arbitration Commission to

intercede on behalf of the strikers.

Last week a committee of strikers' wives met with federal parliamentarians from the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to denounce the manner in which the strikers have been treated, not just in Sonora but in Taxco, Guerrero and Zacatecas, where the miners are also on strike. The women reported that in addition to the state repression against their husbands, strikers' families are being denied medical services and that educational scholarships are being taken away from their children. In addition, many families have had electric, water and natural gas services cut-off.

Stagehands strike California theater

Stagehands at the historic Arlington Theatre in Santa Barbara, California, went on strike last week against demands by Metropolitan Theatre Corporation (MTC) for a 14 percent across the board pay cut and contract language that would allow management to bypass the union's hiring hall. MTC's last, best and final offer also creates a new undefined "utility" position that workers believe will be used to hire cheap labor.

Two national executives of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), which represents the 65 workers involved in contract negotiations, endorsed management's proposal calling it "mutually acceptable." The agreement between MTC and IATSE Local 442 expired in February 2009. Live shows at the Arlington can require between 30-60 workers.

Lockout notice at Vancouver airport

Three hundred food service workers employed by HMS Host at the Vancouver airport are facing lockout after the company served a 72-hour notice on January 4.

The move came just over a month prior to the opening of the Olympic Games in Vancouver and

would affect service at 18 outlets at the airport. The workers, who are represented by Unite Here, had not taken a strike vote or threatened any job action despite the fact that they have been without a contract since March of last year.

The main issues in contract negotiations have been job security, wages, benefits, and pension provisions. Host took the extraordinary action after the union asked for a mediator in stalled talks. Union leaders insist they want to continue negotiations to avoid further action.



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