

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 February 2010

Mexico: Miners union rejects owners' latest offer

Grupo México made a new offer Wednesday to the miners union at its huge copper mine in Cananea, Sonora in an attempt to put an end to a strike that has lasted over two years. Company representatives said that the firm would offer liquidation packages, which would include a payment of 170,000 pesos (about US\$13,100) to each worker. The union rejected the company's offer, saying in a communiqué, "The workers...decided to remain on strike."

The protracted struggle began in July 2007 over safety and health issues, as well as company violations of the labor contract. During this period there have been court battles over the legality of the strike, mass demonstrations, and sympathy strikes across the country. The company has attempted to bring in scab labor and threatened violence against the mineworkers. At one point, the federal police occupied the mine and union leader, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, fled to Canada in order to avoid arrest. The local economy has been devastated, with many workers compelled to leave Cananea to seek employment in the United States and other parts of Mexico.

Grupo México has accused the union of vandalism at the mines. The union denies the claims.

Guatemala: Teachers' protest demands increase in education budget

Thousands of public school teachers staged a

demonstration in Guatemala City Friday, demanding that the education budget be increased. The protest delayed the official start of the school year and affected more than 3.2 million students at 33,000 public schools.

The teachers demand an increase of 3.6 billion quetzals (about US\$438,000) over the Education Ministry's current budget of 8.4 billion quetzals (US\$1 million). The current budget set by Congress allots just US\$4.78 per elementary school student and US\$11.96 for each middle and high school student, according to a January 29 article in *La Prensa*.

The article quoted Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom as calling on the teachers to end the protest and return to work. "Together with the Education Ministry we will assess the disciplinary actions to take against (teachers) who do not show up for their classes," he said, claiming, however, "there will be no dismissals."

One day strike at Hawaii clinic over outsourcing

Healthcare workers and their supporters picketed Kaiser Permanente's Honolulu, Hawaii clinic January 19 in a one-day strike to protest management's decision to relocate 18 mail order pharmacy jobs to Colorado. Kaiser claims that it will shift workers losing these jobs to other positions, but UNITE HERE Local 5, which represents the workers, is doubtful of management's promise and believes the move will result in the loss of other non-bargaining unit positions.

Contract negotiations affecting 1,800 employees at the company's facilities across Hawaii are currently ongoing, with union members working under a contract that had expired in June 2009 but was extended until November. Kaiser operates Hawaii's largest health maintenance organization and is the biggest managed care facility in the United States, with operations in nine states and the

District of Columbia.

Agreement with Seattle Symphony cuts musicians pay

The union representing musicians at the Seattle Symphony agreed to a contract that includes a five percent pay cut through August. The cut is to be restored by mid-2011 and includes a 1.5 percent raise at the beginning of the 2011-12 season. The union also agreed that musicians will each “donate” \$2,010 back to the orchestra.

The agreement must still be ratified by the membership.

Pensioners occupy financial offices

Forestry pensioners occupied the offices of Brookfield Asset Management in Toronto, Ontario last Wednesday to protest actions by the company to avoid the pension obligations of Fraser Papers, which Brookfield is taking over under bankruptcy protection.

The occupation by the four pensioners and a representative from the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) follows a demonstration on January 15, as well as the sending of letters from over 700 pensioners to Brookfield, none of which received a reply. At the same time, Fraser Paper workers in New Brunswick have confronted the company CEO with their own demands.

The retired workers are facing cuts to their pensions of up to 40 percent as a result of restructuring. The CEP, which is currently locked in a court battle with the company over the pension issue, has encouraged workers to bring pressure against the company by other means.



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