

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 September 2010

Conflicts continue in northern Mexico mines

At least 500 miners from the Cananea copper mine in northern Sonora announced September 8 that they would maintain a permanent vigil outside the State Government Palace in Hermosillo. The workers, members of Section 65 of the SNTMMSRM miners union, are demanding a resolution to the strike that began in 2007 over safety and health issues. Another issue is the fate of the union's exiled leader, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, who fled the country for Canada in 2006 under charges of embezzlement and vote fraud. Gómez's supporters claim the charges were politically motivated and cooked up to destroy the union.

Last June, over 2,000 heavily armed federal troops dislodged union miners with tear gas and arrested several members after mine owner Grupo México acquired a court ruling that the strike was illegal. Grupo México then hired nonunion contract laborers (*terceristas*) to work at the mines. Shortly after the Cananea attack, federal police raided and seized control of the Grupo México-owned Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila, where relatives of victims of an explosion that killed 65 miners were encamped.

Since then Section 65 members, their families and supporters have camped out outside the entrance to the Cananea mine—vigils that have at times erupted into verbal and physical conflict with *terceristas* and their supporters.

The Hermosillo vigil was announced the day after 26 members of Section 65 were arrested following disturbances between union members and *terceristas*, in which blows, rocks and shots were exchanged. PRODESC, a civil rights organization, claimed that the violence was started by a group of 300 people dressed in civilian clothes who attacked the strikers' encampment with sticks and rocks. Federal police did not intervene in the melee.

The media, the government and Grupo México have all denounced the union, which they blame for the violence. The mayor claimed that a *tercerista* was killed by a bullet, a claim that he later retracted. No *terceristas* or their supporters were arrested after the fracas.

Mexican Ford workers begin hunger strike

Workers from the Ford stamping and assembly plant in Hermosillo began a hunger strike September 8 in front of the State Government Palace over the lack of response by the company, the union, the CTM state workers' federation, and state and federal authorities to an ongoing conflict with their union's director.

After completing a two-week vigil in the downtown Plaza Zaragoza, ten workers from the plant began the hunger strike, joined later by eight more workers.

One of the protesters, Inés Romero, explained to *El Minero* that they decided to begin fasting after Julio Reina Lizárraga, director general of the

government failed to keep a promise to set up a meeting with Mario Armenta Montañón, a delegate of the Secretary of Labor and Social Security.

"Yesterday we waited for Mister Julio Reina and there was no response; he left us waiting. Today he told us that there was another urgent matter and that he could not communicate, he could not keep us informed, so we decided to go on a hunger strike just the same, because there was no response."

The problems came to a head four months ago when workers in the union, which claims more than 2,500 members, complained that Martínez Herrera had not held a membership meeting in more than two years. Union bylaws require that a general membership meeting be held every three months. In addition, Martínez has not provided an accounting of the disposition of union dues.

One and one-half percent of each worker's weekly salary goes directly to the union, representing a cumulative sum of approximately 92,000 pesos (US\$7,100) per week.

Chilean public employees strike for 48 hours

Members of the National Association of Public Employees (ANEF) carried out a two-day work stoppage September 8 and 9 called to protest the policies of president Sebastián Piñera. The principal complaint of strikers was the sacking of over 2,000 public employees by Piñera's right-wing administration.

The Civil Registry, however, continued operating. Although the president of the association representing the agency's workers, Juan Manuel Muñoz, told *El Ciudadano* that the employees support the mobilization, the Civil Registry is "a very sensitive service" and "it must make a good gesture so that there be an agreement, or otherwise the only ones who suffer are the stressed out functionaries and the public." Muñoz said that only Civil Registry directors would stop working.

At noon on the first day, representatives of the different public sectors met at Santiago's Plaza de la Constitución to denounce the firings, which they called "unjustified." Some legislators and representatives of the CUT labor federation came to join in the march to the Plaza de los Héroes, where ANEF functionaries spoke. One senator said that the current government's policies reminded him of "the dramatic days of the dictatorship" of Augusto Pinochet.

ANEF claimed that the strike had an over 80 percent rate of participation, while the Chilean government put the figure at barely 20 percent. The Subsecretary of the Interior, Rodrigo Ubilla, called the stoppage "illegal" and "a complete failure," and said that the government would dock the pay of those who participated in the stoppage.

One-day strike by Uruguayan health workers

On September 10 members of the Uruguayan Health Federation (FUS) conducted a 24-hour nationwide strike to protest lack of progress in negotiations with private health providers.

Compliance with the stoppage was high across the country, according to FUS secretary general Jorge Bermúdez, who told *El País*, “Even in places where the repression of unions is ferocious like Salto, Paysandú and Carmelo, we have had a very important adhesion.”

In Salto, which is in the northwest, members of the Association of Employees of the Center of Medical Assistance of Salto (AFCAMS) unanimously approved the stoppage in an extraordinary assembly on Wednesday.

AFCAMS is demanding “a salary increase, better working conditions, a larger and better National Integrated System of Health,” according to a *Diario Cambio* report. Related to the salary issue is the chronic late payment of salaries. AFCAMS president Mónica Dornells decried the late payments, because “there are bills to pay, like all workers have ... in case one is delayed, they charge interest.

“The situation is very difficult in all sectors, public and private. There have already been several meetings with the Ministry of Labor, but solutions have not been found.”

Such essential services as emergency, dialysis, pharmacy and others were kept operating during the action.

Bermúdez told *El País*, “For 40 days we haven’t been in negotiations,” because the other parties claimed that their balances were in the red, a claim that he called “hypocritical,” because “they say they’re in crisis and in the health industry there continue to be salaries of up to 500,000 pesos (US\$24,000) per month.”

Paperworkers reject tentative contract

Workers at Longview Fibre Paper and Packaging in Longview, Washington rejected a tentative contract between the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers Local 153 and management September 10. Eighty-three percent of union members voted in the two day ballot. Union officials did not release the final vote total or any details of the contract. Workers turned down an earlier management offer by a vote of 634-1.

The main issue in the negotiations have been managements’ demand for higher employee contributions to health care, the elimination of health care coverage for retirees and cuts to pensions. The 730 workers are working under terms of the old agreement, which expired June 1. On July 31 workers voted to authorize a strike.

Toronto-based Brookfield Management Associates bought the company in 2007, which at the time was losing millions of dollars. Since then the company has been profitable.

Union ends New Jersey transit strike

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1317 ended a seven-day strike September 8 by 100 drivers, mechanics and clerks against New Jersey’s DeCamp Bus Lines as talks between the two sides resumed. The ATU denied that it ordered the back-to-work to avoid having to issue strike pay. Workers would have been eligible for strike pay after one

week.

The ATU claims the strike will be resolved in the next two or three months based on unfair labor practice charges it has filed against the company. Decamp has announced it will unilaterally impose a new medical plan on October 1.

In addition, the company wants to freeze pensions, substitute a 401(k) for a defined pension benefit and implement a lower-tier wage for new hires that will start at \$8 an hour and be capped at \$13.50.

Tentative agreement in Washington State teachers’ strike

Teachers in Ferndale, Washington voted 240-0 to ratify a new contract September 11 and end their three-day strike. According to the Ferndale Education Association (FEA), the new agreement represents a compromise over the issues that caused teachers to walk off the job September 8, closing schools on the opening day of the school year.

The agreement allows for FEA members to conduct a vote on which of the competing health care plans they prefer. In addition, teachers obtained 10 early-release days that will be spread across the school year. The school district agreed to increase prep time for elementary school teachers by 30 minutes per week.

On wages, the school district follows a state pay schedule along with an additional formula to provide a 15 percent allocation locally. The union wanted to increase this allocation to 16 percent in year one, followed by 17 percent and 19.65 percent in the subsequent two years. Instead, the FEA accepted a district compromise of annual percentage increases of 15.65, 16.15 and 19.65.

The school board will meet September 13 to vote on the final agreement and classes are expected to resume the following day.

Workers strike Toronto hotels

As part of an ongoing dispute with hotel giant Fairmont Royal York, workers at hotels in downtown Toronto hosting the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), including the Royal York itself, are staging one-day strikes during the festival to draw attention to their struggle.

The workers, who have been without a contract since July 16, are fighting against increased workloads and job cuts at hotels across the city. Their union, UNITE HERE, represents over 7,000 workers in the Toronto area, many of whom work for wages just above the legal minimum. The union has stated that they are not deliberately targeting the festival and that the timing of the walkouts is purely coincidental.

A number of TIFF guests, most notably actor Martin Sheen and his son Emilio Estevez, have shown support for the workers. Sheen joined hotel workers on the picket line in front of the Royal York. Both the downtown Holiday Inn and the Hyatt Regency saw similar actions over the weekend.

New Brunswick school workers take job action

Over 3,000 school support workers across the province of New Brunswick will be picketing in front of schools next week as they launch a work-to-rule campaign leading up to a possible strike.

The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees

(CUPE), include teaching and library assistants and those working with special needs students. They are protesting poor working conditions and a lack of full-time employment. A recent conciliation report solicited by the former Conservative government did recommend increasing work hours, but called for a two-year wage freeze.

Union leaders have pointed out that support staff in New Brunswick earn wages 30-40 percent lower than support staff in other provinces. They are appealing to the government to settle the dispute fairly.



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