

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 November 2010

## Chilean copper miners enter fourth week of strike

Around 1,500 workers at northern Chile's Collahuasi mine entered their fourth week on strike on Friday. The miners went out on November 5 when contract talks broke down over wages, bonuses and other issues.

Since then, the mine operation, the third or fourth largest in the world, has maintained some production using scab labor, loading 10,000 metric tons of copper for shipment to China last week. In addition, it has carried out an aggressive campaign aimed at sowing disunity among workers, including through personal calls on their cell phones.

The aim has been to get 50 percent plus one to go back to work, thus invalidating the strike. The company offered a bonus of \$29,000 to "unhang" by Friday and claims that more than 200 mine workers have gone back to work, a figure the union disputes. Nonetheless, the number is far below the required 751.

On November 24, a judge for the nation's Labor Tribunal ruled that contacting the miners individually and offering them the bonuses was illegal, and ordered the practice stopped.

Families and supporters have been active in the struggle. On November 20, more than 2,000 people marched in the northern port of Iquique in support of the strike. According to Radio Universidad de Chile, the city had not seen such a demonstration in 35 years.

The Mining Federation of Chile announced on November 26 that it would consider a nationwide strike in support of the miners. Miguel Barraza, a federation director, disputed the company's claims, telling news agency Bloomberg that "only 36 workers have accepted the company's latest wage offer and the mine is operating at 20 percent of normal production levels."

Union bureaucrats have repeatedly expressed their desire to restart talks, which were set to resume Monday morning. Juan Antonio Barraza, the union's secretary, told Bloomberg, "We are hopeful of reaching an agreement; the strike's been going on for a long time now."

## Laid-off Chilean women workers end hunger strike

Twenty-nine women workers ended their occupation and hunger strike in the defunct Chiflon del Diablo mine in southern Chile last week after receiving promises from the government that it would create jobs in the region. The original number had been 33, but 4 left due to health problems.

The hunger strike had its roots in the February 27 earthquake in southern Chile that caused more than 800 deaths and more than \$30

billion in damages. Shortly after the quake, the government started an emergency public works program that employed thousands in the Bio Bio, Maule and O'Higgins regions, areas that suffer from chronic high unemployment.

In early November, shortly after laying off 9,500 workers in O'Higgins, the government eliminated more than 8,000 jobs in Bio Bio and Maule. The women initiated the hunger strike as part of a demand that the program be reinstated. They decided on the number 33 to draw a parallel with the "Atacama 33" miners who were rescued from the San Jose mine in northern Chile after 70 days. A group of about 200 kept a vigil at the mine entrance during the occupation.

The promised jobs program, called the Urban Improvement Program, will only create about 2,000 jobs, a far cry from the needs of the working class in the region.

## Six-day strike by Panama Canal workers ends

A strike by about 1,300 workers on a Panama Canal expansion project ended on November 26 after six days. The strike had been called by the SUNTRACS construction workers' union over overtime pay, working conditions and security.

The workers, who are employed by the GUPC (United Group for the Canal) consortium, struck on November 20. A GUPC press release "complained that a group of workers on the project failed to comply with an agreement to work during national holidays," according to *Newsroom Panama*.

On November 24, union members marched to the presidential building to present their demands to government representatives.

On November 26, Minister of Labor and Workforce Development Alma Cortés announced that the parties had reached agreement "for the welfare of the country" and that "future agreements between the company and employees would be in writing to enable adjustments and calculations of hours worked," according to a *Panama Guide* report.

## Uruguayan customs workers strike broken by government

Uruguayan customs staff went on strike on November 22, paralyzing the movement of shipments in and out of the country. The customs workers were demanding a higher budget for the customs department and better pay.

A group of about 100 customs employees had previously occupied

the Supreme Court building in Montevideo to draw attention to their demands. Police dislodged them at dawn on November 22.

Long lines of transport trucks were held up at various transit points, and cargo movement was paralyzed. Within days, the government moved to break the strike.

On November 25, Director of Customs Enrique Canon called in scabs to man the customs houses. Canon further declared that pay for the striking workers would be docked. Denounced by the PIT-CNT labor federation as a “strike breaker,” Canon was defended by Economy Minister Fernando Lorenzo, who called his actions “the logical response by a responsible government.”

On November 26, the country’s courts ruled the strike illegal, claiming that it harmed other workers. In addition, a judge ruled that pickets supporting the strike were “an illegitimate modality” and not supported by the Constitution.

The strike is one of several challenges besetting the government of president Jose Mujica. In the same week there were strikes by anesthesiologists and surgeons, state bank employees, air traffic controllers and more than 8,000 Montevideo municipal employees.

### **Pennsylvania teachers end strike, accept arbitration**

Teachers of the Moon Area school district, northwest of Pittsburgh, will end their three-week strike and return to classrooms November 29. District officials and the Pennsylvania Education Association (PEA) jointly announced that the return to work was predicated on an agreement to submit to arbitration under a private contractor.

According to school district officials, the process will take about 40 days. Both sides will present proposals in the latter part of December. The private arbiter will take 10 days to make a recommendation, and the district and union will then have 5 days to accept or reject the offer.

Early on in the struggle, the district revealed it was proposing a 2.88 percent wage increase combined with a hike in teachers’ portions of health care premiums from 4.1 percent to 5 percent. State PEA president Butch Santicola claimed the board’s revelation of contract details “violates an understanding” that the two sides would maintain a blackout on contract negotiations.

### **Television crew for reality show wins health care benefits**

The crew for the NBC reality television show “Biggest Loser” ended their strike November 22 after voting to accept an agreement that will provide them with health benefits and union representation—the main goal in their two-week strike. Other details in the agreement between the show’s producers and the International Alliance of Theatrical State Employees (IATSE) were not divulged.

The strike, which began on November 11, shut down production for two days. The producers responded by firing strikers and hiring replacement workers. The 50 strikers then set up picket lines outside the Calabasas studio outside Los Angeles. Trainers for the show refused to cross picket lines, and the host announced a campaign to raise money for strikers on EBay, leading the producers to back down.

### **Migrant workers strike against victimization**

More than 100 migrant farm workers in Simcoe, Ontario, who are each owed thousands of dollars by their employer, Ghesquiere Plants Ltd., have been deported following a wildcat strike in protest against their criminal treatment.

The workers, who are from various Caribbean and Central America countries, have been employed digging and grading strawberries in southern Ontario, but the farm where they were employed has been taken over by creditors. The workers have been told they will likely never be paid what they are owed.

These seasonal workers and thousands like them working long hours for minimum wage have virtually no legal protection and are not allowed to unionize. Even though a recent ruling by the International Labour Organization found that the rules governing these workers violate basic human rights, the matter is likely to drag on through the Ontario courts for some time with little hope of being resolved in the workers’ favor.

### **Winnipeg postal workers stage illegal walkout**

In response to the introduction of a new sorting system, at least 100 postal workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, walked off the job November 22 to protest what they are saying are unsafe practices that have led to injuries and increased workload for postal carriers.

According the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, (CUPW) injuries have increased 20 percent since the system was introduced two months ago in Winnipeg ahead of a nationwide implementation. The new sorting system separates advertising from regular mail requiring a separate bundle.

Canada Post has said that it has no intention of backing down and has threatened to discipline or fire any worker who engages in further job action over this issue.



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