

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 February 2011

Chile: 2010 saw spike in industrial actions

A study released last week by Chile's Labor Ministry points to increasing numbers of strikes and other mobilizations in 2010 over previous years. The study counted 173 strikes last year, double the number in 2003, and with a 44 percent rise from 2009 in the numbers of workers participating.

The report focused mainly on economic losses to the Chilean economy. The number of workdays "lost" reached 333,813, a 20-year record and 52 percent higher than in 2009. Much of the rise is attributed to the mining sector, where some major strikes have broken out over the last five years.

However, this scenario is disputed by other sources. According to *El Mercurio*, "Public companies have traditionally been leaders when it comes to labor conflict, and that trend was clear during this past year's tally of strikes. A study by business professors at the Universidad Católica de Chile showed that public companies have an 18 times greater rate of conflict than private corporations."

Strikes in Chile have not been solely motivated by workplace issues. Last month's announcement of plans by the government of Sebastian Piñera to end natural gas subsidies in Chile's frigid southern Magallanes region sparked mass mobilizations, including strikes, across the region.

Venezuelan Coca Cola workers end month-long strike

Workers at the Coca Cola plant in Valencia, Venezuela ended their strike on February 14, a month after they had walked out over salary demands. In the accord reached between the workers' union and the company, the employees will earn a daily salary 30 bolivares (US\$6.99)

plus the payment of a bonus "that replaces the retroactivity" of the increment, according to union Secretary General Miguel de Pablos.

The company—owned by beverage giant Fems de Mexico—had originally offered 16 bolivares (US\$3.70), to which the union had proposed 45 bolivares (US\$8.10). The Valencia plant employs nearly 1,400 workers.

Mexican mineworkers end strike, mine to reopen

After more than eight months on strike, Canadian mining company Gammon Gold and the

SNTMMSRM miners union agreed to resume work at the El Cubo mine. SNTMMSRM is headed by Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, who is currently living in Canada, having fled prosecution for alleged embezzlement of union funds.

Located about 10 kilometers east of the city of Guanajuato, El Cubo produces gold and silver. After a strike broke out last June, the company shut down operations, with Gammon claiming "continued illegal labor disruptions" as well as "the untenable financial demands made by the union workforce."

The company terminated 397 union workers and filed criminal charges against seven union executives. However, in a communiqué last week, the union said that negotiations had reached a satisfactory conclusion. Management has agreed to pay 100 percent of lost salaries, and will announce the date for reopening the mine in the coming week.

Teachers strike in Mexico to protest police violence

Protesting the repression of teachers and demonstrators during a February 15 visit by President Felipe Calderon,

teachers in the Mexican state of Oaxaca walked off the job on February 16. The one-day strike involved over 72,000 teachers and affected 13,500 schools.

The stoppage followed clashes between members of Local 22 of the SNTE teachers union and police, who prevented teachers from entering the main plaza where Calderon was giving a speech. Calderon was in Oaxaca to meet with Governor Gabino Cue. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets to repel the educators, some of whom fought back with fists and stones. Twelve teachers were injured, as were three news photographers.

The Wednesday actions included a march by teachers and supporters from the state education department to the main square. In other parts of the state teachers blocked roads.

Police brutality against teachers is not a new occurrence in Oaxaca. In 2006, strikes and mobilizations by SNTE teachers and the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) against the hated governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz brought severe repression by federal police, resulting in the deaths of scores of teachers and APPO members.

One-day strike at Pennsylvania hospital

Some 550 nursing assistants, maintenance, service, cafeteria and housekeepers held a one-day strike February 9 to protest the demand for an open shop by Pocono Medical Center in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. The Service Employees International Union, which represents the striking workers, revealed that more than 70 percent of its members signed an open letter declaring their support for the open shop.

The hospital says it has offered workers 3 percent wage increases per year over the course of a three-year agreement. The minimum pay for SEIU members is \$9.50 an hour and the wage increase would bring pay to just over \$10 an hour. The hospital also said it is pushing a defined benefit plan and wants workers to pay 10 percent of health care premiums.

Toronto, Montreal baggage handlers on strike

Four hundred baggage handlers at airports in both Montreal and Toronto went on strike February 15 after talks broke down between the Teamsters union and the employer Handlex, a subsidiary of Air Transat.

Negotiations broke off over salary and bonus issues affecting split-shift workers, the same issues that negotiations foundered on a year ago. In addition, the union says that improvements that were promised in exchange for a pay freeze they accepted in 2009 have not yet materialized.

The striking workers load baggage for a number of international carriers and the company has been using management and other workers to prevent disruptions to service or flight delays.

Sherbrooke city workers strike again

Only weeks after 400 outside city workers in the city of Sherbrooke, Quebec, east of Montreal, went on strike for 13 days over Christmas, they are set to strike once again on February 26 for nine days coinciding with the March break.

These workers, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been without a contract for over three years but their union continues to mount only actions that are explicitly limited in their impact. The issue of the length of a new contract remains a central impasse, with the city seeking a seven-year contract to encompass the 2013 Summer Games that Sherbrooke will be hosting.

Those affected include road and sewage, snow removal, garbage collection, engineers, and parks and recreation workers. Apparently there has been only one meeting with management since the last strike, but the city is still in a position to legally contest the strike.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact