

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 July 2011

Chilean copper workers undertake one-day strike

Nearly 45,000 Chilean copper workers nationwide went out on strike Monday, shutting down the state-owned company Codelco and driving up prices on the global metal markets. Chile is the largest producer of copper in the world, and Codelco's revenues account for fully 40 percent of the government's annual income.

Union leader Raimundo Espinoza claimed participation in the strike was 100 percent, and suggested the action may be extended if workers were met with violence from the government of President Sebastian Pinera.

The industry was nationalized four decades ago under the Allende government; since that time it has been chipped away at by privatizations and joint ventures with other firms. Pinera is putting forward plans for new management of the company, private investment, and the cutting of health benefits and at least 2,600 jobs.

Copper workers protested against these cuts and echoed calls by the recent mass demonstrations calling for free higher education to be funded with copper revenues.

Mexican public service workers strike over pay and benefits

About 12,000 public service workers in the Mexican peninsular state of Baja California held a general strike July 7 in a dispute over pay and benefits. Workers picketed in front of government buildings in the state's five municipalities, in some cases in temperatures of over 40 degrees C (104 F).

The workers demand a salary increase of 5.5 percent and an increase in benefits of 3 percent, as opposed to the state's offers of 4.8 and 1.2 respectively. The strike was called, according to union director Martín Plascencia, after 14 negotiation sessions failed to break the stalemate.

State senior officer Francisco García Burgos claimed that the state did not have the funds to meet the demands and threatened to dock the pay of the strikers.

The state Chief Clerk's Office delegate for Tijuana maintained that there were sufficient informal employees (*empleados de confianza*) to keep state and municipal services running, though not at 100 percent capacity.

The minimum daily salary for a public employee in Baja California is 480 pesos (US\$41).

Brazilian petroleum workers carry out one-day slowdowns

Workers for state-controlled energy firm Petrobras slowed work at 65 company sites in Brazil's Campos Basin last week over the company's profit-sharing plan. The Sole Federation of Petroleum Workers (FUP), which called the slowdown, had presented Petrobras with a profit-sharing proposal in 2008 that the company rejected. The FUP calls the current plan "undemocratic."

An article in *Upstream Online* reports that FUP "is protesting over Petrobras' profit share payout for oil workers which would rise 12% despite its profits having grown 17% last year to 35.2 billion reais (\$22.7 billion). FUP is demanding workers receive the equivalent of 25% of the dividends paid to shareholders."

The slowdowns were spaced over three days, with exploration and production rigs being targeted for Wednesday, refineries on Thursday and distribution terminals on Friday. The company claimed that production was unaffected on Wednesday, and vowed that supplies would be not be interrupted.

In fact, the FUP planned for the action to be as toothless as possible, with FUP spokeswoman Alessandra Murteira telling reporters on July 5, "The idea is to protest without affecting safety or production."

Argentine oil workers return to work after 100 days of conflict

Workers for oil firm Repsol-YPF and other industry-related companies in Argentina's Santa Cruz province went back on the job July 4 after 100 days of strikes, pickets and blockades. A blockade at the LH-3 plant outside of the city of Las Heras was lifted after an agreement guaranteed payment for lost workdays and reincorporation of workers fired during the period.

In the early hours of Sunday, a contingent of some 400 police arrived at Las Heras and stormed the LH-3 facility. Acting on a judge's order, they dislodged the workers, arresting three whom the police claimed had threatened them.

In April, Hector "Chaco" Segovia, president of the Private Petroleum and Gas Union of Santa Cruz, without consulting the membership, declared a strike over salary demands, which he called off the next day after reaching an agreement. A dissident faction of the union remained on strike against the raise and against Segovia's unilateral actions.

There followed a series of conflicts that pitted factions against each other and included takeovers of plants and union local

offices. The federal Labor Ministry designated an “intervener” from the national petroleum union confederation to mediate the conflict. The strike was lifted in May, but a number of Repsol-YPF plants remained blockaded, at times with the support of teachers, who had also gone on strike. The teachers returned to their classrooms last week.

Paraguayan public transport drivers hold 12-hour stoppage

Union representatives of public transport workers lifted a work stoppage at noon July 5, twelve hours after calling it. The union reached an agreement with the government, creating a labor board that will consist of representatives of the Metropolitan Area Secretariat of Transport (Setma), the public transport business sector and the union.

La Nación reported that the purpose of the board would be “to analyze the juridical situation of all the transport businesses; the technical situation of the units; the economic situation of the enterprises and the application of labor laws.”

Two other issues will be on the table: a subsidy to companies to prevent fare hikes and security guarantees for passengers and drivers, who often face the risk of robbery and physical attacks.

One stipulation in the agreement is that the union will refrain from calling any industrial actions until July 20 while the board deliberates and comes to decisions on the findings. The decisions will then be submitted to the rank and file for a vote.

The Vice Minister of Transportation, Raúl Mongelós, had high praise for the union bureaucrats and the “absolute tranquility” in which the stoppage was carried out.

Meanwhile, eight public transport drivers were brought before the district attorney of San Lorenzo to be booked for disturbing the peace and causing damage to a bus. Two more faced accusations of bodily harm, property damage and disturbing the peace, stemming from a confrontation with a supervisor.

Workers strike two New York nuclear plants

Workers at Nine Mile 1 and Nine Mile 2 nuclear plants in Scriba, New York walked out midnight July 8 after contract negotiations broke off between the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 97 and the Constellation Nuclear Energy Group.

About 460 workers are involved. They have been picketing the facilities in around the clock shifts. The main outstanding issue involves the pension plans for future retirees. Management has continued operation of the plants using supervisory personnel. No talks are currently scheduled.

Labor board ruling in strike by Texas flour mill workers

The US National Labor Relations Board has ruled that C.H. Guenther & Son Inc engaged in unlawful video surveillance of workers on strike at its San Antonio, Texas flour mill. About 100 members of Teamsters Local 657 have been on strike since April 25 at the facility. The company is known for its Pioneer Brand of pancake, gravy and biscuit mixes.

If Guenther and the union can’t reach an agreement on the video surveillance issue the matter will go before an administrative law judge. If the judge rules in favor of the union he can order the company to stop its illegal surveillance. The company, however, would retain the right to appeal, potentially dragging out a decision for months.

The main issue in the strike are increases in medical premiums, which the company wants to pass onto workers. Workers are insisting on a pay increase to cover higher insurance costs.

One day strike at Quebec University

Support staff at the University of Sherbrooke east of Montreal, Quebec, staged a one-day strike last week in their latest bid to pressure the school to grant them a new contract.

Fourteen hundred members of the Syndicat des employés et employés de soutien de l’Université de Sherbrooke (SEESUS) have been without a contract since the end of 2008 and voted overwhelmingly for strike action last year. Nevertheless, aside from a similar strike in March of this year, this is the only job action their union has mounted.

A large demonstration was held the day of the strike and was supported by many among another 100 research workers at the University who have been without a contract for over five years.



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