

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Mexican miners march to demand resolution of three strikes

Mineworkers from the Mexican states of Hidalgo, Sonora, Guerrero, Querétaro, México, Zacatecas and others marched through the city of Zacatecas August 6 to call on the federal government to resolve ongoing conflicts at three mines: Cananea, Sonora; Taxco, Guerrero; and Sombrerete, Zacatecas. All three are part of billionaire Germán Larrea Mota Velasco's Grupo México mining conglomerate. The strike at Sombrerete has been going on for four years.

The National Mine and Metal Workers Union (STNMM), which called the march, claimed that around 1,500 miners came from locals all over the country. Representatives of various sectors spoke to the miners, who assembled downtown after the march. They denounced both Larrea and government officials. The miners accuse the government of protecting the mining magnate from prosecution for flouting Mexico's labor and safety laws.

One speaker called for the investigation of the death of a miner who died during a confrontation between supporters and opponents of Napoléon Gómez Urrutia, the STNMM general secretary whose election was reversed in 2006 by the Labor Ministry. Gómez later fled embezzlement charges and now lives in the US. A video message by Gómez was played at the rally.

In addition to demands for better wages and working conditions, miners reiterated their call for justice for the families of the victims of the Pasta de Conchos mine explosion that killed 65 miners in 2006.

## Chilean mine workers end strike

Striking miners at the Chilean Escondida mine complex voted

to return to work August 5 after a 15-day strike. About 65.5 percent of miners voted to accept management's latest productivity bonus offer and return to work August 7.

Management's offer was not only far below the miners' demand; it was below its original offer made before the start of the strike. Although the union's proposed bonus amount was minuscule in light of record company profits, Escondida was determined to prevent the risk of "contagion" in the rest of Chile's mining sector. Thus, the company refused to budge, calling the strike "illegal" and threatening to sue the union.

The union bureaucracy did nothing to gain support for or spread the strike call apart from a one-day stoppage at the Collahuasi complex in northern Chile. Although the company claimed there would be no reprisals or firings, the fate of the over 7,000 nonunion contract workers who joined the strike is unclear.

## Chilean Starbucks workers return to work

A month after walking out, striking workers for Chilean franchises of the Starbucks coffee house chain went back on the job without achieving any of their demands. Among those demands were better pay, transportation and lunch allowances, consistently scheduled break times and a pay raise schedule that would replace the current merit-based system. Three workers also ended their 12-day hunger strike held to bring pressure on Starbucks.

Starbucks remained adamant throughout the duration of the strike. Andrés Giordano, president of the Starbucks union and one of the hunger strikers, complained to *Diario Electrónico*, "The business didn't make any kind of gesture, dialogue was cut short ... at no time did they show real intentions to seek agreement, they didn't offer any modification of salaries ... nothing that could be established in the collective contract..."

José Ortiz, vice president of the World Syndical Federation, pointed to the impunity with which Starbucks ignored labor laws and the government's refusal to take action. He added that the Labor Ministry did nothing while Starbucks broke International Labor Organization conventions regarding collective bargaining, freedom to unionize and protection of workers, and that "by refusing to apply them, it is helping

North American businesses as if we were a true colony.”

### **Argentinean teachers hold two-day strike**

On August 3, striking members of Argentina’s Entre Ríos Educators Association (Agmer) and the Technical Educators Association (Amet) concluded a 48-hour strike without achieving any of their salary objectives.

According to the *Diario del Argentina*, the strike had little impact on the General Education Council (CGE) due to a low turnout, which the CGE claimed was only 22 percent. Under pressure from the CGE and school administrators, nearly 24,000 out of 30,687 teachers went to work on August 3, lower than the previous day’s level.

Agmer officials have called for a 72-hour strike August 9-11, in the week before primary elections August 14. The *Diario* article reports, “For many observers, this measure ... has a component of tarnishing the last stretch of the electoral campaign” as the unions will attempt to put pressure on politicians.

Amet secretary Andrés Besel told the daily that they would call assemblies to analyze the situation to determine what steps to take next.

### **Grenadian airline workers end “go-slow”**

On Thursday, August 4, Grenadian workers at Antigua-based Leeward Islands Air Transport (LIAT) airline voted to end their week-and-a-half “go-slow” on notification of LIAT’s promise to pay some of the overtime compensation and meal allowances that they are owed.

The government of Grenada will provide EC\$90,000 (US\$33,333) to LIAT to help it pay the workers. However, the total that LIAT has promised to pay—in tranches beginning the middle of August and lasting to the end of November—is only EC\$500,000 (US\$185,185), a fraction of the EC\$6 million (US\$2.2 million) that is owed. Some of the debts date back to 1983.

The issue of payment of the remainder of the debt will go to an arbitration panel that will begin hearing on August 12.

### **Union orders end to Great Lakes maritime strike**

The American Maritime Officers (AMO) union ordered 140 of its members on August 5 to end their five-day strike against the American Steamship Company and return to their ships in the Great Lakes region. The decision of the AMO came after company spokesman David Foster threatened to hire permanent replacements to displace strikers who operate the company’s 14 idled ships in Duluth’s Twin Ports harbor on Lake Superior and Sturgeon Bay harbor on Lake Michigan. No new agreement was presented by the company.

AMO officers and stewards voted by a 99 percent margin to reject the company’s final offer which threatened to wipe out 14 jobs arbitrarily and insert language in the contract that would ultimately allow them to eliminate a total of 56 jobs. The contract also would fail to fund medical, retirement and training benefits while replacing them with inferior company benefits.

American Steamship Company, based in Williamsville, New York, is the largest shipping company on the Great Lakes and hauls coal and iron ore. American Steamship is a subsidiary of GATX Corporation, which controls the largest railcar fleets in the world.

### **Machinists ratify contract with Hawker Beechcraft**

Members of the International Association of Machinists ratified a new five-year contract August 6 with aircraft maker Hawker Beechcraft. The agreement covers 2,600 production workers at the company’s Wichita, Kansas plant.

The vote was 69 percent in favor of accepting the contract, which freezes wages for the first two years and increases employee health care contributions. The contract provides for wage increases of 1 percent, 2 percent and 3 percent in each of the final three years. “It’s going to force workers to go out and get part-time jobs,” one worker told the press.

In 2008 Hawker Beechcraft workers conducted a 25-day strike. In 2010 contract negotiations resumed after the company threatened to move its operations to Louisiana. However, workers rejected company demands for wage cuts and other concessions.

A management spokesman said the company was “pleased” with the outcome of negotiations. In addition to the issues of wages and health benefits the contract includes a small pension increase and provides severance pay to workers who lose their jobs to outsourcing.



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