# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**22 November 2011**

### Peruvian coal miners continue strike

The strike by mineworkers at Peru's Cerro Verde copper mine passed the 50-day mark on November 17 without an agreement between owner Freeport-McMoRan and the union.

The union had originally demanded an 11 percent raise while management's original offer had been 5 percent for 2012 and 4 percent for the next two years. The union has since lowered its demand to 6 and 5.5 percent respectively, but management has remained adamant.

A meeting was set for Friday with little expectation that the sides would come to terms. The mineworkers have requested that the regional government take action, but authorities say they will not move as long as both sides continue to meet. The national government of Ollanta Humanta declared the strike legal—a first in Peruvian labor history—but has since refused to intervene in the conflict.

Freeport-McMoRan, a multinational mining firm, is also the subject of a two-month strike at its huge gold and copper complex in the Indonesian province of Papua. (See "Papuan miners extend two-month strike".)

### Colombian mineworkers strike

Over 1,200 mineworkers at the Calenturitas open pit coal mine in Colombia's northern department of Cesar stopped work on November 16 after union reps failed to reach an accord with Prodeco, the operator. Prodeco is an affiliate of multinational mining giant Glencore.

On October 3, the Sintracarbón union presented a petition to Prodeco with a list of demands relating to job security, health coverage, housing, working conditions and education. The company agreed to engage in negotiations, but did not budge on any substantive issues. The membership voted to strike.

A Sintracarbón official told *El Heraldo,* "We're asking for labor stability because we see that Prodeco is firing workers supposedly based on just cause, with which they're letting even sick people go…without caring about the origin of the sickness, without even detecting if it is of common or work-related origin."

Prodeco negotiators issued a statement claiming respect for Colombian labor law, but alleging irregularities in the voting. In the same statement they announced that they have initiated legal action to have the strike declared illegal.

### Panamanian doctors and health workers end 29-day strike

The strike begun October 20 by Panama's public hospital doctors and health workers over a proposed privatization law ended November 18 with an accord signed between the National Medical Negotiating Commission (Comenenal) and the government. The strike was precipitated by the projected passage of Law 349, which would form a Public-Private Association for public institutions. Medical workers feared that the law would open the door to wholesale privatization of medical and other public services.

About 5,000 doctors employed by the Social Security Fund (CSS) and Health Ministry (Minsa) had joined the strike to protest the Law 349.

On November 16, thousands of protesters marched through downtown Panama City to show support for the strike and opposition to the law. The march included medical unions, students, environmentalists, workers and teachers. Before the accord was signed, Comenenal announced that it would prepare for a general strike if the government did not withdraw the law from the National Assembly.

According to the terms of the agreement, the CSS and Minsa will convoke extraordinary sessions beginning December 5 for preliminary discussions regarding Law 349, after which it will be submitted to the National Concertation Board for debate and discussion that will include Comenenal and other organizations.

*El Nacional* reported, "In the accord the government also committed not to initiate any administrative disciplinary process and to desist from those already begun, nor any other measure considered as reprisal against the union directors or against any state service worker that had participated in the paralysis of activities."

**Mexican hospital workers strike over supply shortages**

Workers at the Regional Hospital of Sahuayo in the Mexican state of Michoacán stopped work at 7:30 am on November 17, demanding the provision of supplies necessary to tend to their patients. The workers, members of Section XXI of the SNTS health workers union, did not strike essential services, limiting their action to administrative and external consultation areas.

Shortages include such items as furniture, physical plant, medical supplies and oxygen, as well as sufficient personnel to treat the patients. Section XXI secretary general María Javier Gutiérrez Gutiérrez complained in a press conference that the deficiencies have gone on for years, but in the last six months the situation has gotten worse.

The union has given administrators ten days in which to resolve the problems, but has not elaborated what further actions it plans if the demands are not met.

**Machinists strike over open shop demand by Wisconsin crane company**

About 200 machinists walked off the job November 14 at Manitowoc Crane Company in Manitowoc, Wisconsin after the company demanded the changes in contract language that would create an open shop. According to International Association of Machinists Local 516 business representative Benito Elizondo, the union had reached "agreement on many issues" until the "company proposed eliminating long-standing contract language requiring any employee who benefits from negotiated wages and benefits to become a member of the union that negotiated those benefits."

IAM members voted by a 183-2 margin to reject the new four-year contract proposal. The company said the IAM had misrepresented its proposal to union members and is calling for a federal mediator to intervene in the dispute. As a result of loss of production, the company announced the layoff of more than 150 members of the boilermakers union beginning this week.

According to Elizondo, the company also spoke of requiring an annual union recertification vote. Both open shop and recertification votes were part of legislation pushed on public workers by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker earlier this year.

**Striking York region bus drivers rally**

Striking bus drivers rallied last week outside a York Region council meeting to press their demands for their one month long dispute to be sent to arbitration. About 560 drivers have been on strike since October 24 in the sprawling suburban region just north and west of Toronto. Their action has shut down 60 percent of the bus routes in the area. Non-striking carriers continue to service the remainder of the routes.

The striking workers are represented by two separate locals of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and are employed by three bus carriers—Veolia Transport, Miller Transit and First Canada. York Region has pursued privatization policies as "a proven business model" for many years.

Bus drivers average about $20 per hour in York Region. Their pay is vastly below the $29 per hour average of drivers in the nearby centres of Toronto, Mississauga and Hamilton, Ontario. Benefits also lag significantly with their metropolitan counterparts. The drivers are required to work on average 10 hours per day with little if any officially scheduled break time. Split shifts are also common amongst the three carriers.

The strikers have demanded that their employers make a significant move to bring their wages into line with other drivers in the region. However, in response the private carriers have offered a 13.5 percent increase over five years—an offer that actually represents a wage cut when Canada's 3 percent annual inflation rate is taken into account.

The three carriers are continental and intercontinental transnational corporations. Miller Group, based in the region, operates highly lucrative businesses across North America that includes transit, waste management and road maintenance. Paris-based Veolia owns transit, waste management and water processing operations across the globe. It posted an $800 million profit in 2010. The First Group, based in Aberdeen, Scotland owns Greyhound Corporation among other transit interests and claimed a $500 million profit last year. All three companies have refused to return to the bargaining table after the strike began.

Representatives of the union, unable to offer a viable strategy to defend its membership, have already signalled that they would be willing to surrender the right-to-strike and have the work of the drivers declared an essential service. They have also stated that they would be willing to sign an extraordinarily long contract with the employers to lock in a new contract that would solidify sub-standard industry wages and conditions.