Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 December 2011

Chilean funeral workers strike

On December 24, workers for the Hogar de Cristo (Christ's Home) funeral parlor in Santiago, Chile entered their third week of a strike against the enterprise. The workers have been out since December 9 over salary demands, working conditions and the business' antiunion practices. Hogar de Cristo's main branch employs 250 workers, 186 of whom are unionized.

A demonstration the week before, in which marchers blocked traffic on a bridge, resulted in the arrests of six protesters.

Workers maintain that most of them earn a basic salary that is equal to the minimum wage. Sales personnel "work with a complex system of commissions according to quantity and value of the sales that is not written anywhere! ... That is, 80 percent of the remuneration is based on an informal component," according to a union communiqué.

The message also denounced the lack of work stability for new hires, as well as management's steadfast refusal to include assistants in the benefits package that the contract gives other workers.

After the workers and their families held a symbolic Christmas celebration in front of the funeral chain's headquarters, union president Jaime Gutiérrez told reporters that the last meeting with management at the Labor Directorate "did not have positive results."

Gutiérrez accused management negotiators of being "absolutely intransigent" on the issues, declaring, "the enterprise is betting on debilitating us through illegal replacements." He added that the workers' counterparts in Hogar de Cristo's 18 branch offices throughout the length of Chile supported the action.

Peruvian air traffic controllers strike again

Air traffic controllers began a strike December 22 over wages and working conditions. The controllers had already carried out a 48-hour strike December 9-10 over the same issues.

At the heart of the strike action is the fact that Peruvian air traffic controllers have not been given a raise in 14 years. However, of equal importance is the decrepit state of the radar system, a condition that airport workers claim has already brought about a number of near misses.

Spokespeople for the Peruvian Airport and Commercial Aviation Corporation (Corpac) claim that the workers will get a raise in 2012 and that, due to modernization plans for the existing radar system, there is no need to replace it. A December 22 Corpac statement maintained that "all the demands have been met."

The government of Ollanta Humala quickly responded to the strike action—which was set for 72 hours—by declaring a state of emergency and contracting air traffic controllers from Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and other countries to keep the airports operating. In addition, a Corpac spokeswoman threatened to bring in the Peruvian air force to keep services going.

Alberto Pimentel, secretary general of the air traffic controllers union, called the government's decision "grave," but the union succumbed to the pressure, cutting the strike short and returning to work at 7:00 PM December 23.

Mexican energy plant workers strike

Some 600 workers at a thermoelectric plant in the Pacific coastal city of Manzanillo, Colima, Mexico stopped work on December 23 to demand the complete payment of their *aguinaldos* or year-end bonuses and to ask the Labor and Social Security Secretariat to intervene. The workers are employed by Coicisa SA de CV, which operates as part of the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE).

According to a *Diario Oaxaca* report, the workers "indicated that they don't count on the support of the syndical leaders and that the payment owed them should have been covered on December 20, but they only received half." The firm claims that its agreement with the CFE gives it the right to pay the other half in January, "but the law shows that it should be paid at the latest by the 20th," reported *El Universal*.

Lockout of Ohio-Indiana utility workers ended by contract ratification Workers at Vectren Energy Delivery ratified a new three-year agreement December 22, bringing the lockout of 270 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to a close.

Vectren, which provides natural gas and electricity service in

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Indiana and Ohio, locked out workers on December 16 after they rejected a contract proposal that would have required off-duty utility workers to accept 50 percent of the emergency assignments they are given or face disciplinary action. Previously, emergency calls were voluntary.

In the new agreement, off-duty workers will be required to accept 30 percent of the emergency assignments in the first year, 35 percent in the second, and 40 percent in the third year.

Strike at Minnesota industrial manufacturer ends

The 360 workers at the Polar Tank Trailer manufacturing plant in Opole, Minnesota ended their 19-day strike on December 19 after the ratification of a new five-year agreement. The International Association of Machinists declined to reveal the vote tally, except to say that it was close.

According to the union, the new agreement removed contract language objectionable to workers that allowed the outsourcing of jobs along with other contract language governing job classifications. However, health care costs for workers will skyrocket by 80 percent.

York transit workers strike enters ninth week

A strike of York Region transit workers entered its ninth week over the holiday weekend, as municipal authorities impose an injunction against picketers outside of public buildings. A court ruling December 22 ordered that pickets could delay buses for only three minutes. Approximately 60 percent of the region's bus service has been impacted, affecting 44,000 commuters.

The 560 workers, organized under the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 113 and Local 1587, are protesting against a gap in wages and benefits between the York workforce and those in the rest of the Toronto area. York bus drivers earn 30 percent less than operators on other regional systems, according to Local 113 president Bob Kinnear.

The company is offering a mere $350 bonus for drivers to return to work.

Authorities insist that the strike is creating unsafe conditions for transit riders, pedestrians, and motorists. Picketers have been struck by vehicles several times during the strike.

Ottawa Salvation Army workers poised for work stoppage

60 employees of the Salvation Army in Ottawa, Ontario could walk off the job or be locked out in the coming days after voting to take strike action last week.

The workers, who are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) are employed as social workers and support staff at the Booth Centre, a downtown homeless shelter. The company is offering raises of between 2 and 3 percent in a new three-year deal, but that means little to the workers who currently earn as little as $11.50 an hour which is up to 30 percent less than their counterparts at other shelters.

Although they have been in a legal strike position since last Tuesday their union is advising against strike action saying a lock-out may be imminent.

London locomotive workers facing lock-out

Over 700 workers at Electro-Motive, a subsidiary of Caterpillar Inc. in London, Ontario, may be locked out as early as this week as tensions heighten between the company and the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW).

The company, which produces diesel electric locomotives at the plant, has reportedly begun to move out key pieces of machinery and brought in a fleet of transport trucks in preparation for a showdown. This takes place amid troubled contract talks, behind which is a company threat to move its operations south of the border to Indiana.

The union has said it will not give in to major concessions being demanded by the company having already agreed to have the last contract, which expired in June, extended into the New Year. Union leaders say they are not prepared to strike but have stationed workers at the plant through the holidays to monitor any further provocative activity.

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