

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 January 2012

Argentinian police attack protesting drivers

A protest by truck drivers in southern Argentina's Chubut province met with police violence on January 19. The drivers had gathered at installations of Camuzzi Gas del Sur to protest the firing of about 200 workers throughout the Patagonia region following Camuzzi's decision not to renew its contract with Correo Sur, a private mail delivery firm that employed the drivers.

In the coastal city of Trelew, protesters had camped out at Camuzzi's headquarters the night before. In the morning, the truckers' union parked vehicles in front, blocking traffic. Police arrived and fired rubber bullets at demonstrators, wounding at least 20.

Trelew truckers union director Luis Colio denounced the repression and told reporters that the union would continue its "plan of struggle" while the head of the national truckers federation, Hugo Moyano, negotiates with Camuzzi in Buenos Aires this week.

Chilean construction workers strike mining dock project

Some 300 Chilean workers for the Belfi construction company walked off the job January 19 over the firm's noncompliance with its agreement regarding salaries, working conditions and other issues.

The firm is contracted to construct a coal loading dock for the Minera Isla Riesco mining company in Chile's southern Magallanes region. The workers, members of the CUT workers federation, complain that promised benefits have not materialized.

CUT regional president Dalivor Eterovic told *El Mercurio*, "There is overcrowding, unhealthiness and labor insecurity," and added that most of the contract labor has not come from the Magallanes region. He also lamented that Minera Isla Riesco takes no responsibility for the problems, claiming that they are solely Belfi's concern.

Workers complain that there is not a fixed salary and supervisors evaluate pay by using a scale of 1 to 7. Some continue working after their contracts have expired and are unsure as to what—or whether—they will be paid.

A meeting of management and union representatives ended with no resolution of any of the issues. The regional daily *El Pingüino* quoted some of the workers after the meeting. "It was a joke for the workers," said one. Another claimed, "They fooled us with the

wages; they told us that it was another wage we were going to make."

The same worker complained about the bad conditions at the workers' encampment: among them, lack of potable water, unsanitary dormitories in which workers are crowded into small spaces, and the poor quality of the food. At least 12 workers suffered from food poisoning at the camp cafeteria the day of the strike action, forcing its closure by authorities.

Six-day strike by Panama Canal construction workers

Some 6,000 construction workers at the \$5.25 billion Panama Canal expansion project went on strike January 16 to demand better salaries and security. The project is being carried out by Grupo Unidos para el Canal (GUPC), a consortium of European and Panamanian firms.

The workers' principal demand was directed at the government: a raise in the minimum hourly rate from \$2.90, established by law in 1980, to \$4.60. Other demands, numbering nearly 30 and aimed at GUPC, included timely payment of overtime, improved transportation and better treatment by the foremen, most of whom are not Panamanian.

GUPC claimed that the delays were caused by the implementation of a new payroll system and that the wrinkles had been ironed out. The consortium countered the salary demand with an offer of a 5 percent raise.

On January 22, after days of tripartite negotiations, the government announced that it would establish a new minimum wage rate by decree. The rate will go up a minimal \$.44 to \$3.34 per hour. The workers were to return to work January 23.

Most of the 30 demands were not addressed. Saul Mendez, one of the workers' negotiators, told AP that "important advances ... were reached," but "pointed out that the pact does not leave them happy about everything."

Strike at Mexican bottling plant passes one-year mark

Workers at the Sidra Pino bottling plant in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico marked one year on strike January 20. The workers are demanding wages and benefits that are owed them dating back to December 2010.

The Sidra Pino plant produced the popular Soldado de Chocolate (Chocolate Soldier) drink as well as Sidra Pino fruit soda. The last owner, Victor Erosa Lizarraga, has a long history of fraudulent dealings, labor conflicts and environmental and safety violations.

Erosa threatened to close the plant in the middle of 2010 if the 234 workers—half of whom were members of the bottling workers union—did not agree to accept a 50 percent wage cut. The workers agreed, only to see the plant shut its doors without warning in December 2010.

Two months before, Erosa had closed another of his firms, the Siderurgica de Yucatan steel mill, after nonpayment of salaries and bills and numerous safety and environmental complaints. The workers nonetheless continued to come to work in the Sidra Pino plant until January 20, 2011 when they filed criminal complaints against Erosa and declared a strike. They have maintained a presence outside the factory since. Erosa's whereabouts are unknown.

The workers' situation is dire. Aside from fitful deliveries of some groceries from the mayor's office and donations from sympathizers, they are on their own. The government arbitration board ruled in favor of the workers, but they have yet to see any of the 3 million pesos (US\$227,000) levied against Sidra Pino. As one worker told Yucatan.com, "Our leader is in contact with the national directorate of the bottling plant workers union, but they don't tell us how things are going."

One striker summed up the workers' sentiments: "I worked 25 years in Sidra Pino and the union gave my savings and those of my coworkers to the business so that it could get out of its economic problems, but that's all she wrote."

Iowa aluminum workers strike over insurance and two-tiered wage

Workers at the Nichols Aluminum plant in Davenport, Iowa went on strike January 20 after negotiations broke down over a company demand to implement an inferior insurance plan that will shift even more costs onto employees. The 254 members of Teamsters Local 371 also are opposed to a company effort to implement a two-tier wage scale that will pay new hires four dollars an hour less than current workers.

"I think they're just trying to see if they can break us," striker Daren Schnowske told Quad Cities CBS 4 News. "There is plenty of money to go around there, they just don't want us to have any of it."

The old agreement expired on November 15. One month earlier, Nichols cut a production shift, laying off 34 workers. Management strikebreakers are being brought in to help meet production goals.

Pennsylvania teachers end strike, issues unresolved

Teachers for the Neshaminy school district near Philadelphia returned to work January 20 as issues over health insurance, wages and retroactive pay remain unresolved. Teachers walked off the job on January 9 to call attention to their contract deadlock, which has been unresolved since 2008.

The Neshaminy Federation of Teachers ordered its members back to work just in time to avoid violation of a state law that mandates strikes must not obstruct the requirement that students receive 180 days of instruction by June 30. During the walkout the local school board refused to meet with teachers to discuss contract issues.

A three-member state-appointed panel will now be brought in to make a non-binding recommendation, due some time in the spring. If the deadlock persists, teachers will be eligible to strike again. Should teachers walk out, the school board has indicated it will file an injunction to force them back to work.

Newfoundland firefighters poised for strike

After overwhelmingly rejecting a tentative deal accepted and recommended by their union, firefighters in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland are now set to take job action after voting last week in favor of a strike.

Wages and benefits are a key issue in the dispute, with firefighters determined to gain parity with their counterparts in Atlantic Canada and cities such as St. John's, where firefighters recently won significant gains in a new contract.

Talks continued over the weekend between the city and the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) through a conciliator. Cornerbrook is one of the only jurisdictions in Canada where firefighters are not designated an essential service and so are legally empowered to go on strike.



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