

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 August 2012

## Mexican mine workers strike following fatalities

Mine workers at Minales de Monclova's Mimosa coal complex in the Mexican state of Coahuila struck following the August 3 collapse of a mine shaft that buried six of their coworkers under 100 tons of coal. Three weeks earlier, an explosion in another mine owned by Grupo Acero del Norte (GAN)—which also owns Monclova—killed seven miners.

On August 7, more than 500 mineworkers gathered at the principal access to Mimosa and shouted slogans demanding justice and a federal and state investigation of the disaster. One worker told *El Universal*, "They say that it is a very secure mine, but those are total lies. We are always in danger from methane gas.... The only thing that they care about is getting the most coal and boasting about production records and we are always screwed [*jodidos*]."

The worker also denounced the union, which he called a "white [i.e., company] union that is whatever the company says, it serves them and not us; they even robbed the strike fund that was 2,860,000 pesos (US\$218,438)."

The union released a statement on August 8 stating that it will file "industrial homicide" charges against Monclova.

Such is the dissatisfaction with the union that some workers are calling for the return of Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, former miners' union boss who fled corruption and embezzlement charges in 2006. A Mexican court cleared Gómez Urrutia of the charges in April.

On August 10, the Mexican government suspended work at 32 small coal mines in Coahuila, giving the owner, Binsa, 30 days to improve working conditions or supposedly face revocation of its license. Binsa ran a Coahuila coal mine in which 14 miners died in 2011.

Coahuila is the site of the most horrendous mining disaster in recent years, the 2006 explosion at Piedras Negras that killed 65 miners.

## Indefinite strike at Mexican oil plant

Workers at the Agro Industrias del Sur vegetable oil plant in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero began an indefinite strike August 8 over a number of demands.

The workers are calling for a wage raise, payment of an overdue bonus, improved working conditions, medical insurance, benefits and conversion of temporary workers to permanent status. Another issue is management's nonresponse to complaints about problems with the machinery.

Workers are also demanding a face-to-face meeting with the plant's director. One employee told *yucatan.com*, "We have taken the plant today in consequence of wanting social security, the wage raise that we have been asking for since two years ago, and they haven't given us anything."

## Peruvian public health agency doctors strike over salaries, conditions

Doctors for Peru's Essalud social security health system in Lima, Arequipa, Piura and other cities went out on an indefinite national strike August 7. The doctors, numbering about 8,000, demand a salary raise and better working conditions.

Last April, a temporary raise was put into effect until August. The doctors want to make the raise permanent. One union official picketing outside a Lima hospital told reporters, "We are professionals with high responsibility and a record of 12 to 15 years and we just collect the 2,500 soles per month (about US\$950)." He accused Essalud officials of having an "ostrich policy" and of ignoring calls in July for dialogue.

The doctors' union claimed 85 percent adherence to the strike nationwide, but service was maintained for emergency areas, intensive care, hospital and emergency surgeries.

## Panamanian teachers, government resume negotiations after strike

On August 11, members of Panama's Educators Unity Coordinator (CUM) teachers' union federation and the Education Ministry (Meduca) agreed to negotiations, following a strike begun August 8. Teachers were to hold meetings on August 13 to decide on whether to return to class while the parties, with the Catholic Church acting as mediator, bargain over a number of issues.

The walkout was called in response to the firing of eight teachers, among them Andrés Rodríguez, leader of the Asoprof professors association. Rodríguez has been critical of the education policies of the government of Ricardo Martinelli and of his education minister, Lucy Molinar. He was sacked for alleged violations of professional norms.

CUM claimed that 70 percent of Panama's teachers took part in the strike. In addition to the call for the reinstatement of Rodríguez and the other teachers, CUM called for Meduca to negotiate over a petition that it had submitted over a year ago.

Included in the petition are repairs of schools "in deplorable condition," return of salaries docked during a strike last year, a wage increase and an end to harassment of teachers.

The government has not agreed to the reinstatements, only saying that it will consider each case. As for the salary issues, Molinar told reporters that although she is disposed to listen to the educators, "we have to be conscious that the budget is not infinite."

## Contract workers strike Trinidadian oil company

Contract oil workers struck and protested outside the Petrotrin oil company's Trinmar operations building in Point Fortin, Trinidad, August 9. The workers' union, the Oilfields Workers Trade Union (OWTU), called the actions to pressure the firm to comply with an agreement signed by the parties in February. About 700 workers showed up at the protest.

In the February agreement, Petrotrin management promised to regularize the pay of contract workers and institute improvements in working conditions but has been dragging its feet. According to OWTU president Ernesto Kezar, contract workers “are used, abused and more so they work for about quarter or one eighth of the pay that we work for. We signed an agreement and we need to have it properly implemented.”

### **San Francisco museum workers authorize strike**

Museum workers at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor and DeYoung museums voted to strike after their contract expired at the end of July. Management claims it is offering workers a double-digit pay raise.

But the 114 members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 see this as overshadowed by management demands to shift health care costs onto workers’ backs. The workers also oppose a lower wage tier for new hires that will set the stage in the future for the replacement of veteran workers making higher wages.

The strike authorization comes after nine months of tense discussions. The union has called the Corporation of Fine Arts Museums offer “appalling” given the fact that the two museums have seen a \$19.6 million increase in assets over the past two years. Museum management counters that they “barely broke even last year.”

### **AT&T workers in three states carry out two-day strike**

Some 20,000 AT&T wireline workers in California, Nevada and Connecticut carried out a two-day strike August 7-8 to protest the company’s position in the current contract talks. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) says AT&T is seeking to increase workers’ portion of health care costs while undermining job protections.

Under the current contract, some workers have provisions that guarantee them job openings at other parts of the company should they be laid off. AT&T management wants to remove restrictions that inhibit their ability to downsize the workforce despite a \$4 billion profit last year.

Back in June, workers in California and Nevada called a one-day strike citing a company memo that impugned their work performance. Meanwhile, AT&T has concluded contracts with CWA locals and members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) representing 48,000 wireline workers in other regions of the United States.

### **Halifax home care workers to strike**

Nearly 400 workers employed by Northwood Homecare in Halifax, Nova Scotia, are set to go on strike in the coming days pending the outcome of ongoing talks and a conciliator’s report.

Despite a strike deadline set for Monday morning, negotiators for the Nova Scotia and General Employees Union, which represents the workers, have said that job action could be averted if there is progress in conciliated talks.

The workers affected have been without a contract since March 2010, and strike notice was delivered after they overwhelmingly rejected the latest contract offer. One outstanding issue in the dispute concerns unpaid

work availability, with the employer demanding that workers remain available for two hours beyond their paid shift.

### **Strike looming for Ontario social workers**

With the company demanding a four-year wage freeze, 120 workers employed at Craigwood Youth Services in London, Ontario, could be on strike this week after being without a contract for two years.

The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), whose negotiators say that, in addition to the wage freeze, the employer is refusing to meet pay-equity increases dating back to 2006 and blocking such increases in a new contract.

Without a positive outcome from a mediation session on Wednesday of this week, the union says that workers could be on the picket line by the end of the week.

### **British Columbia: public service professionals strike**

Ensuing from a strong strike mandate last May, scores of licensed professionals across southern British Columbia walked off the job last week after being without a contract since March of this year.

The strikers included foresters, engineers, inspectors and psychologists employed by the provincial government at four centers in the province. According to their union, the Professional Employees Association (PEA), which represents 1,200 members, this is the first strike in its 38-year history. Union leaders say they have limited the strike to a fraction of the membership with the hope of pressuring a settlement while minimizing the impact on the public.

With PEA members’ pay being frozen since 2009, main issues in the dispute include wages as well as job security, with their union only asking for pay increases to keep pace with inflation.



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