

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 February 2013

Colombian coal miners strike

On February 7, coal miners at Colombia's Cerrejon coal mining/export complex, the nation's largest, began a strike over pay and benefits. The workers, members of the Sintracarbon union, had voted for the walkout on January 29, but according to Colombian law, have to wait ten days before striking. The two sides failed to reach an agreement during last-minute talks Thursday, precipitating the strike.

Some 4,500 of Cerrejon's 5,600 "direct" employees are in Sintracarbon. The strike is the first at Cerrejon since 1990. In 2011, the workers voted for strike authorization, but the parties came to an agreement before it took effect.

Coupled with the suspension of loading at Drummond coal—the nation's second largest coal exporter—after a coal barge nearly sank last month, Colombia's coal output has dropped by 85 percent.

In negotiations, union bargainers called for a raise of 7 percent this year; Cerrejon offered 5. Workers considered the company's medical and educational benefit offerings insufficient.

President Juan Manuel Santos sent his labor minister, Rafael Pardo, to Cerrejon Friday to mediate. Union official Orlando Cuello was quoted by Reuters: "We haven't received a formal invitation, but the union is open to meeting with the government or the company if they so desire."

Some observers anticipate further labor strife this year. A report on the strike in *La República* remarked: "The negotiations at Cerrejon are the first in a series of labor disputes foreseen for this year in Colombia, where mining and petroleum companies have confronted a high labor militancy and an increase in attacks from the guerrilla war." In fact, both the USO oil refinery workers at Barrancabermeja and coffee production workers are threatening to strike over unresolved issues.

Bolivian construction workers hold short strike over mistreatment, other issues

About 150 construction workers at the Chimore airport construction site near the central Bolivian city of Chimore walked off the job on February 7, demanding an end to mistreatment, provision of adequate clothing and safety equipment, potable water and labor contracts.

The Chimore airport construction project contract was signed between the Bolivian government and the Consorcio Chimore in October 2011. The workers were contracted seven months ago. Original projections for completion of the project were for March, but heavy rains have slowed construction. Workers have complained of "hostile treatment" by the personnel director as well as two engineers.

A negotiator from the Ministry of Labor went to the site to mediate. After receiving assurances that the engineers would be reprimanded and put on 60 days probation, that the personnel director had received "a memorandum with a strong call to attention" and that the other issues would be addressed, the workers returned to their labors.

Trinidadian hotel workers protest job insecurity, state of negotiations

A number of workers—both permanent and nonpermanent—picketed the Hilton Trinidad Hotel February 7 to protest job insecurity and related issues. The permanent workers, members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), expressed their dismay with the slow pace of salary negotiations. Ongoing since June, talks broke down February 6.

Another group of workers, classified as "weekly-rated and temporary," picketed over pay and job insecurity. CWU Secretary General John Julien told reporters that some of the workers have been listed as part-time staff for over 30 years. The workers will decide this week whether to intensify their actions.

Communication Workers extend contract with AT&T

The Communication Workers of America (CWA) and AT&T agreed to extend their contract while negotiations continued for an agreement covering 22,000 employees nationwide. The contract covers field technicians, internet technology specialists retail store employees and call center operators.

Earlier, AT&T workers gave a 98 percent vote to authorize strike. The current contract, called the orange contract, was last negotiated in 2009. Workers are demanding an increase in wages pointing to the \$31 billion in profits made by AT&T over the past 2 years.

Meanwhile AT&T said it had reached an agreement with the CWA covering another 20,000 workers in the southwest. The company is offering each eligible employee a \$1,000 bonus if they ratify the contract by February 27.

Supreme Court declines to delay order to return striking Connecticut workers to their jobs

The US Supreme Court denied a request February 6 by a Connecticut nursing home chain to delay an order to reinstate 600 striking workers at five of its facilities. HealthBridge Management had argued that a recommendation by the National Labor Relations Board to a federal judge to return striking members of the Service Employees International Union was questionable because three of President Barack Obama's appointees to the labor board were struck down by a federal court.

The Supreme Court's decision to deny HealthBridge's request does not immediately bring the eight-month strike by nursing home workers to a close. A spokesperson for SEIU District 1199 said they expected a return to work, "but we don't know exactly when."

The strike was triggered in July of last year when Healthbridge sought to impose new health care costs on workers that would amount to as much as \$8,000 during the course of a year. Pensions were also to be replaced by a 401(k) plan where the company match would not rise higher than 0.75 percent of pay. Other demands included reductions in sick pay, vacations and holidays.

In the first day of the strike, HealthBridge charged workers with sabotage and vandalism, something the union rejected and local police would not corroborate. In October 2012, HealthBridge launched a RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) lawsuit against the SEIU alleging

"criminal sabotage, intimidation and other acts of extortion." The SEIU countered that their contract proposals were based upon a pattern agreement ratified at 50 other nursing homes. Meanwhile, the NLRB ruled that HealthBridge refused to bargain in good faith with the union.

Social service strike in B.C.

Over 3,000 community living workers across British Columbia went on strike last week to protest low wages and cuts in government funding after being without a contract for over a year.

The workers are represented by the BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) and may be joined this week by 1,000 workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) also employed in social services.

Community living workers involved in the strike help people with developmental and other disabilities. Their starting wage is only \$15 an hour, a dollar less than a decade ago, and union leaders point out that nearly \$300 million has been cut from union contracts since 2004.

In addition, almost 500 family service workers in southern B.C. went on strike February 6th and 7th to protest similar issues of government funding cuts.

Country Club workers locked out in B.C.

Nineteen grounds workers employed by the Quilchena Golf & Country Club in Richmond, British Columbia, were locked out last week after only 9 days of negotiations and mediation.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have received support from a number of other unions on their picket line at the club gates. Many member of the golf club also expressed their support for the locked out workers.



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