# Workers Struggles: The Americas

### 16 April 2013

**24-hour strike in Chilean state copper mining sector**

Mine workers at Codelco, Chile's state copper mining firm and the world's leading copper producer, staged a one-day nationwide strike April 9. The action, called a "warning strike" by the 20,000-strong public mine workers union, paralyzed operations at Codelco mine sites throughout Chile, with about 5,000 tons of production lost.

The strike was timed to coincide with the international copper industry's CESCO/CRU conference in Santiago, the world's biggest gathering of copper industry figures.

Union officials said the stoppage was to bring attention to pressing issues like safety, working conditions, contract labor, health care provision and pensions. Tensions between Codelco and the mineworkers have intensified recently due to revamps in the industry that have led to increased use of contract labor and fears of layoffs. In addition, the death of a miner last month—after repeated warnings from workers to management—led to protests that have brought safety concerns to the fore.

Although the union claimed total adherence to the strike in the state sector, private sector mineworkers' support was lower. Workers at mines owned by such international players as BHP Billiton, Anglo American and Antofagasta Minerals delayed work for an hour or two, but none engaged in complete strike actions.

**Chilean choral and administrative workers strike over bonus**

At 7:00 am April 9, about 80 chorus members and administrative workers at Santiago, Chile's historic Teatro Municipal went on strike after a month and a half of negotiations with the theater's management. Workers set up picket lines in front of the theater and, carrying banners and chanting, briefly interrupted traffic.

The workers had rejected management's last offer by a 94 percent majority on March 28, effectively voting for a strike. The union leadership, however, continued to negotiate in meetings mediated by the Labor Ministry.

Union bargainers lowered their demand for a 10 percent raise—after eight years without a significant increase—to 8 percent. Now they are calling for 4.5 percent, 1.5 percent over management's original proposal, as well as some increases in benefits.

One stumbling block has been management's refusal to reinstate "sueldo 13" (salary 13), an end-of-year bonus that the unions had given up in 2009 for workers contracted since April 1 of that year. Once a common feature in contracts throughout Latin America, the end-of-year bonus has come under attack in many countries.

The city's mayor, Carolina Toha, who also heads the theater's executive board, the Cultural Corporation of Santiago, in adamantly rejecting sueldo 13, asserted, "we hope to look for more modern formulas to reduce the remuneration gaps inside the theater."

There were no performances scheduled during the week of the strike, but management had already put out a call for replacement workers for an April 15 presentation of the ballet "Zorba the Greek."

**Panama Canal workers strike, demand unpaid bonus**

Some 3,000 workers in the Panama Canal expansion project struck on April 8 to demand the payment of their year-end bonus. The workers, who belong to the Suntracs construction workers union, are working on the third set of locks on the Atlantic side in the province of Colón.

The project is run by the United for the Canal Group (GUPC), who the workers claim has made unjustified deductions in the payment of their "thirteenth month," a bonus paid at the end of the year. Workers have also accused GUPC of shorting on social security payments.

GUPC, in a press release, stated that it is obliged by law to make the deductions, and that the strike action is unjustified. The company called for "an attitude of dialogue." However, Suntracs provincial director David Niño declared to prensa.com that he has already tried to approach GUPC on the matter without success.

**Salvadoran medical workers strike for wage increase**

On April 12, members of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute Medical Workers Syndicate (SIMETRISSS) stopped work for four hours at four hospitals in El Salvador. From 7:00 to 11:00 a.m., doctors struck and passed out information explaining the action to clients coming for consultations and other appointments.

A SIMETRISSS spokesperson, Patricia Gonzalez, explained that the union hopes to establish negotiations with the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS) director, Leonel Flores, as soon as possible. However, if they receive no response they will extend their strike to more sites at a national level, said Gonzalez.

Flores, claiming concern for the patients, threatened disciplinary measures against doctors who participated in the action.

The doctors have requested salary adjustments for the last 12 years, according to Roman Lopez, SIMETRISSS general secretary, but the whole time they have not been listened to, necessitating the resort to a strike.

**Guyanese nurses begin receiving overdue payments after strike**

Nurses at the Linden Hospital Complex in Linden, Guyana began to receive overdue gratuities, approved absence, maternity leave and other payments April 11 after a series of job actions.

© World Socialist Web Site

The nurses, some of whom had waited two years for their payments, carried out “go-slow” and work-to-rule actions March 27. They escalated their actions to include strikes and taking their grievances to the capital Georgetown, where they held protests in front of the Parliament Building during national budget talks.

According to a Demerara Waves report, “The 76 nurses and ancillary staff began receiving their GUY$6.6 million [US$3,092] payout from around 4 p.m. Thursday. While several other workers, mainly senior staff, had received their gratuities with their March 2013 salaries, the almost 80 other workers had to go without money that they had hoped to spend on preparations for the new school term.”

**St. Lucian civil servants march for pay raise**

Civil servants on the island of St. Lucia marched April 8 through the capital Castries to demand a salary increase. The workers had been on strike for nearly three weeks over their demand for a 9.5 percent raise.

The civil servants are members of the Civil Service Association (CSA), which is part of the Trade Union Federation (TUF). Several TUF unions, including those representing teachers, nurses, police and firemen, settled for a four percent increase months ago. However, due to the low pay classification of the majority of their workers, the CSA has stuck by its original increase proposal.

According to the *Caribbean Trakker*, “The decision by the other unions, which like the CSA, are all members of the Trade Union Federation (TUF) has led to a split within the umbrella grouping with CSA president Mary Isaac questioning the “solidarity” shown by her colleague trade unionists.”

CSA has returned to negotiations and members were set to vote on whether to continue with the strike.

**American Crystal Sugar lockout ends**

Workers at American Crystal Sugar voted by 55 percent to end their struggle against concessions in the marathon 20-month lockout of 1,300 workers at plants in North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota. Management refused to budge from their demand that workers surrender work rules, seniority, health care benefits and have their pensions transferred from the union to the company.

Back on December 1, 2011, company CEO David Berg told a shareholder’s meeting, “We can’t let the labor contract make us sick for ever and ever and ever. We have to treat the disease and that’s what we’re doing here.” At that time, Berg’s salary had grown by 23 percent to $2.4 million while Crystal Sugar’s net revenue’s grew by 25 percent to $1.5 billion.

The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union, which represented the locked out workers, refused to take a position against management’s concessions, pledging to remain “neutral.” This happened despite the fact that workers voted down the concessions contract on four occasions, starting with a resounding 96 percent rejection in July 2011. Some 640 locked-out workers have since then quit or retired and would not have voted at last Saturday’s ratification meeting.

This divergence between the workers and the labor bureaucracy essentially reveals the support by union officials for management’s position. In a revealing statement, John Riskey, president of Local 167G, told the Minneapolis Star Tribune, “The lockout was dragging the company down…”

**New talks in Ohio sanitation strike**

Talks between Republic Services/Allied Waste and the union representing sanitation workers at the company’s Carbon Limestone Landfill near Youngstown, Ohio resumed April 10 as the strike by 23 members of the Teamsters Local 377 continues. The strike began March 27 when Republic Services, which controls 42 percent of the market for sanitation services in the United States, demanded that landfill workers give up their current retirement plan under the Teamsters Central States Pension fund and accept the inferior 401(k) pension.

One day before negotiations restarted, about 150 workers at Republic Services’ commercial and residential truck yard in Sun Valley, California walked out on strike in support of the Youngstown, Ohio workers. So far, some 10 separate Republic Services facilities in California, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio have carried out sympathy strikes. But the solidarity actions have been spread out and of limited duration and have not involved other sections of the working class, thereby essentially isolating the Carbon Limestone strikers.

**Auto workers locked out at Windsor plant**

Last week at least 16 workers at the National Auto Radiator Manufacturing Co. (Narmco) plant in Windsor, Ontario were locked out and about 200 retirees had their health and drug benefits discontinued after contract talks broke down.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) who have taken measures to continue retiree coverage through private insurance and recover costs from the company in the courts.

The lockout followed the rejection by workers of the latest contract offer from Narmco which contained demands for drastic cuts to wages and benefits. The last contract expired March 31 and the union says they suspect that the low-ball offer was merely a pretext for the ultimate shuttering of the plant.

**Ruling denies teachers right to refuse voluntary duties**

Last week, a ruling by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) declared that a union advisory to teachers in Ontario earlier this year to withdraw from extracurricular activities constituted an illegal strike.

The ruling is against the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) who have brought forward a Charter challenge against Bill 115, the law introduced by the Ontario Liberal government in January which allows government to deny teacher’s right to strike and to unilaterally impose contracts on them. In consideration of this appeal, the OLRB has not yet issued orders against the ETFO, pending the outcome of that court challenge.

While the ruling maintains that the union cannot deny any individual teacher’s right to withdraw from voluntary duties, it says that the union can’t advise its members to do so.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site