

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 September 2013

Latin America

Chilean copper mineworkers strike for wage, bonus raises

Following their 88 percent rejection of a September 2 wage and bonus offer, workers for Chilean state copper producer Codelco went on strike September 5. Over 1,000 workers downed their tools at the El Salvador mine in the nation's northern region. The collective contract expired September 1, and last-minute mediation failed to bring an offer acceptable to the mineworkers.

Codelco management claims that declining profitability at the complex due to degradation of ore quality and rising costs makes the 15 million peso (US\$29,500) bonus demanded by the workers unreasonable. Instead, Codelco offered 9 million pesos (US\$17,700) and "soft loans" of 2 million pesos (US\$3,940), an offer it claims is "the maximum that we can offer."

The walkout came on the heels of a September 3 blockade of access roads to El Salvador by some 200 employees of Codelco subcontractor Aramark, which provides food and facility services. The workers, members of the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC), are demanding better salaries, benefits and working conditions.

Chilean home center workers continue month-long strike over pay demands

About 860 workers for Chilean home improvement chain Sodimac remain on an indefinite strike that began August 7 after the workers, members of the Sodimac Warehouse Workers Union (Sintrabos), rejected the company's wage offer. Some of the workers have vowed to go on a hunger strike.

Sodimac is the main home improvement chain in Chile and regionally, with stores in Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina. Last year's profits reached 83 billion pesos (US\$163,579,000) with a 14 percent increase in sales over 2011. In 2012, its president and eight directors, primarily made up of members of the powerful Solari family, helped themselves to a 31.8 percent pay hike, bringing in about 153 million pesos (US\$302,000) each.

The average Sodimac worker earns less than 254,000 pesos (US\$500) per month, according to Sintrabos president Leslie Gonzalez.

Right after the strike began, Sodimac offered to raise monthly wages by 20,000 pesos—less than US\$40—in 2013 and 2014. The result would be a wage 10 percent above the legal minimum wage. The company

also offered a "negotiation completion bonus" of 300,000 pesos (US\$588), a 3,500-peso (US\$6.86) "logistical specialization" bonus raise, and 0.5 percent of profits, which would amount to about 25,000 pesos (US\$49) per year. Sodimac withdrew the offer after it was rejected.

Mexican high school teachers protest education reforms

At noon on September 5, members of the Bachelors' College of Quintana Roo (COBAQROO) in southern Mexico struck, marched, and held vigils to protest the pro-market education reforms initiated by former president Felipe Calderon and continued under current president Enrique Piña Nieto.

In Mexico, a preparatory high school is called a colegio de bachilleres, or COBACH. The mobilizations made COBAQROO the first COBACH to strike against the reforms, which threaten teachers' labor rights and job security. Nearly 800 unionized members work in 48 COBACH work centers in Quintana Roo.

The Sitacobaqroo teachers union is hoping to pressure the state government to reopen discussions about the reforms, which it had held previously without budging.

The reforms are not the only issue that sparked the protests. Sitacobaqroo union official Benita Moreno Cardenas told El Universal, "Independent of the appearance that the approval of Educational Reform represents for workers, as a COBACH subsystem we have a series of local problems, like the lack of SAR (retirement) payments since November 2012, which represents millions of pesos."

Mexican beverage workers strike over imposition of rival union

On September 2, workers at the Jugos del Valle juice plant in Tepotzotlan, Mexico state, voted in assembly to strike to protest the unilateral imposition of a union that the workers had not chosen.

The more than 850 workers are members of the Food, Juice, Grocery, Similar and Related Packing Workers of the Mexican Republic Union, which is affiliated to the Workers Confederation of Mexico (CTM). The union has been affiliated to CTM for over 60 years.

The CTM has requested the intervention of the Federal Labor and Social Security Secretariat.

Jamaican school workers go on work-to-rule to protest nonpayment of benefit

Several hundred school administrative and ancillary workers throughout Jamaica went on work-to-rule September 2 to protest the nonpayment of a previously agreed benefit. The government had promised the one-off J\$25,000 (US\$246) to be paid in August, but workers at more than 200 schools had not received them yet.

Work-to-rule is a form of slowdown in which workers only perform duties that are in their job descriptions. The Union of Schools Agricultural and Allied Workers general secretary, Keith Comrie, said the work-to-rule would remain in effect “until further notice.”

The minister of education, claiming the required information had not been received from the eligible schools, promised that the payments would be completed by the end of September.

United States

Union officials call off strike by Texas helicopter workers

United Auto Workers Local 218 called off a strike September 6 by over 2,500 machinists at Bell Helicopter’s Fort Worth plant after one day on the picket line. CBS News claimed workers were “bracing for a long strike” before union officials called off the action.

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Bell Helicopter is seeking to raise health care premiums on workers and slashing pensions and overtime benefits. The company wants to do away with the defined pension benefit plan and substitute the inferior 401(k). On wages, management claims it is offering a 9 percent wage increase. But workers dispute this, claiming the proposed contract for many workers freezes wages in the first year and only provides 2 percent hikes in years two and three of the contract.

During picketing, one striker was struck by a pickup and suffered a dislocated knee. The union and management have engaged in months of fruitless bargaining and workers have gone without a contract since June, having twice rejected company offers.

Canada

Nanticoke Steel workers accept concessions contract

Workers at US Steel’s Nanticoke Lake Erie mill in southwestern Ontario narrowly voted to accept a concessions laden contract and return to work after enduring a four-month lockout. It was the third time the Nanticoke workers had voted on a new contract and the deal was ratified by a slim 57 percent majority. The workers had twice turned down similar proposals from the company but, in the end, were forced back to work by extreme hardship and a growing understanding that their union—the United Steelworkers (USW)—offered no way forward for battling management’s concession demands.

The deal—which mandates a five year wage freeze, cuts to vacation time, cost-of-living allowances and other benefits—was so egregious

that it was presented to the membership by the union local without recommendation. Shortly after workers had voted down a similar deal last month, senior bureaucrats in the USW summoned local officials to the union’s international headquarters in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to demand a slightly revised company offer be once again put to a vote at Nanticoke.

Three years ago, US Steel locked out the Nanticoke workers for eight months in an ultimately successful drive to impose a two-tier pension system. Workers at Hilton Works in Hamilton were locked out for almost a year in 2010-11. There, the USW accepted a concessions laden contract that froze wages, imposed a two-tier pension scheme, ended the inflation indexing of pensions, and slashed hundreds of jobs.

Throughout the just concluded lockout, the USW cast the Nanticoke conflict in nationalist terms. It accused US Steel of shipping work formerly done at the Lake Erie Works south of the border, while failing to account for why the union—which organizes workers on both sides of the border—has consistently refused to launch continent-wide strike action against the company and imposed round after round of job and wage cuts on workers at steel mills across North America.

Strike at University of Windsor

Nearly 300 workers at the University of Windsor in southern Ontario went on strike last week in the first job action of what could soon grow into a broader confrontation between union locals and university management.

The striking workers, who include skilled trades and professional staff, are members of Local 1393 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is one of five CUPE locals currently in contract negotiations with the university, altogether representing over 1,100 employees.

Union leaders submitted their final proposal last Friday, which included a small wage increase, before going on strike Sunday, saying they were only looking to maintain what they have after accepting a three-year wage freeze in the last contract, which expired at the end of July.



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