

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 October 2013

Peruvian informal miners end five-day strike

On October 4, representatives of Peru's National Confederation of Artisanal and Small Miners (Conami), Artisanal Miners Federation of Sandia and Carabaya provinces (FEMASAC), and an official for the High Commission of Affairs for the Formalization of Mining signed an agreement ending strikes and protests begun by informal miners September 30. The miners returned to work at noon that day.

Small-time miners scrape out their existence in various regions of Peru, such as Madre de Dios, Sandia and Carabaya, areas generally not profitable enough for large-scale mining operations. There are about 30,000 informal miners in Peru.

The government has attempted over the years to squelch the mining—which it says causes damage to the environment, farms and farm animals—at times resulting in confrontations. The informal miners struck to protest the interdiction as well as the difficulty in gaining legal status for their mining.

The government is hoping that formalizing small-scale mining will make it easier to control and tax. High Commissioner Daniel Urresti told RPP, “The accords are clear; that all repudiate illegal mining and that we have to accelerate the formalization process, through which we will revise the entire standard in effect.”

The agreement calls for a “dialogue table” in Puno, to which informal miners’ representatives can bring proposals. Despite the signing of the accord, miners in Sandia and Carabaya have threatened to return to strike action if the regional governor does not fire the director of the Regional Energy and Mining Board.

Argentine bank employees hold partial strike over longstanding grievances

Employees at the Bank of the Argentine Nation (BNA) went on a partial strike, stopping work for the last three hours of each workday, beginning October 3. The action stems from complaints dating back to 2011.

Among the complaints are the cutting of internships, incomplete filling of vacancies and lack of personnel. The BNA has seen an increase of a million and a half in accounts over the last few years. Medical complaints from overwork have increased, according to union sources.

In the BNA branch office in Santa Rosa, workers added the demand that conditions in the building—in particular the kitchen and the restrooms—be improved following the deaths of two employees there. According to a *La Arena* report, “The bank in Santa Rosa has 49 employees and it would need five or six more to satisfy the attention of the customer.”

Strike over pensions by Bolivian workers at dam construction site

The Misicuni Multiple Project, a dam construction project northwest of the Bolivian city of Cochabamba, was paralyzed October 4 when 200 workers struck. The workers took the action to demand the standardization of contributions into the Pension Fund Administration (AFP) by Empresa Misicuni, Bolivia’s state water distribution company.

The cause of the strike was the fear among the workers that they faced firing by the Misicuni Hydroelectric Consortium (CHM) and they would not be paid pensions, whose payment to AFP have been pending for 22 months. CHM president Jorge Alvarado blamed the delay on “some problems and very low net revenue, because of the slow advance” of the project.

Alvarado called the strike “illegal” and denounced the workers’ “intransigent position.” President Evo Morales blamed the strike on “those groups who agitate, convince and strike” and urged the workers to return to the job. A commission from Misicuni met with the workers’ union, but was unable to convince the workers to return.

However, on October 5 the workers decided to suspend the strike until October 8, at which point union reps will meet with CHM and government officials. According to *Los Tiempos*, “The continuity of the work will depend on the accord that is reached in the meeting.”

Dominican medical workers called out on three-day strike over wages

Thousands of public medical workers in the Dominican Republic began a three-day strike on September 30. Nearly all of the nation’s 168 public hospitals were affected, though emergency services remained in effect.

The strike call followed the news that next year’s budget will not include pay raises in the medical sector.

Public hospitals in the Dominican Republic employ about 50,000 doctors and nurses. The monthly salaries of doctors range between 25,000 and 42,000 Dominican pesos (US\$600 and \$1,000), while nurses earn around 21,000 pesos (US\$500). Their unions are demanding a 60 percent raise.

Stagehands’ strike shuts down opening night at Carnegie Hall

Stagehands at Carnegie Hall called a strike October 2 forcing the cancellation of the opening season gala concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra. The dispute revolves around the demand by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 1 to extend its jurisdiction over work in the newly established Education Wing of Carnegie Hall.

Sanford Weill, chairman of the board at Carnegie Hall, declared, “To give them jurisdiction in the educational spaces would just take away money that should be going to education. There is no precedent for that.” Weill, as CEO of Citigroup, is infamous for his role in tearing down the

Glass-Steagall act that opened the door for the financial and insurance sector activity that nearly brought down the economy in 2008 and provided Wall Street with unlimited bailout money.

While the opening night concert was cancelled, a gala dinner nevertheless took place at the Waldorf-Astoria. Some 600 well-heeled patrons paid \$1,000 for cocktails and \$1,500 for the dinner.

Strike and lockout end at Ohio hospital, but no resolution of staffing and patient care issues

Nurses continued to return to their jobs over the weekend at ValleyCare Northside Medical Center in Youngstown, Ohio, following a one-day strike that triggered a lockout. About 485 nurses of the Ohio Nurses Association held a one-day strike September 24 over staffing and patient care issues.

When nurses attempted to return to work the following day, management issued letters to each individual nurse allowing some to return while refusing others. A hospital spokesperson claimed that until a 72-hour contract for replacement nurses expired, many nurses would be barred from returning to their jobs.

Clearly, management's tactic had little to do with stipulations regarding the replacement subcontractor, but was aimed at breaking up the unity of nurses. When the nurses' union first announced their intention to strike, management declared it would fire any nurses who participated.

The strike and lockout appears to have done nothing to alter the opposition of nurses to ValleyCare Northside's drive to implement a flexible staffing system that would allow management to call in nurses and send them home based upon the fluctuation of patients. Meanwhile, nurses are seeking contract language that gives them specific rights to advocate for patient safety.

California first responders' strike ends with union decertification

First responders in El Centro, California voted 51-35 to decertify the Teamsters union September 27, bringing a 62-day strike against Gold Cross Ambulance Service to a close. About 60 workers launched their strike at the end of July, having gone six years without a pay increase. The workers opposed management's demand that health insurance only cover employees and not their family members. Gold Cross Emergency Medical Technicians make \$8 an hour, medical dispatchers \$9, and paramedics just over \$9 an hour.

Gold Cross Ambulance Service, which holds a contract with Imperial County for first responder service, immediately hired replacement workers and some of them qualified to vote in the decertification election. As a result, replacement workers combined with workers who crossed the picket line to end Teamster representation. Under the decertification, workers have the right to form their own independent bargaining committee to negotiate with management.

Gold Cross management has declared that it will not allow some striking workers back. The bitter strike involved many picket line altercations that are being used to victimize workers. In some cases, strikers charge that incidents are fabricated.

Ohio janitors strike over wage freeze and loss of hours

Janitors in Columbus, Ohio commenced a series of strikes September 24 against contractors for downtown office buildings claiming unfair labor practices, charging managers with using threats and intimidation against workers. Four contractors, including ABM and Professional Maintenance, want to freeze janitors' wages until 2015 and cut the full-time workforce from 70 percent to 15 percent.

Professional Maintenance is alleged to have cited the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act as the reason for the reduction of full-time workers. Companies with more than 50 workers who log more than 30 hours a week—with 30 hours constituting full time status—will be required to provide health coverage.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents the striking workers and also backed Obama and his health care reform, has attempted to pressure downtown Columbus businesses to adjust the terms under which they subcontract cleaning services, and thereby make concessions. They have also lined up Democratic Party politicians to make empty gestures in favor of the strikers to create the illusion that more pressure will alter the situation.

Grocery chain on strike in Alberta

Some 8,500 workers at 28 Loblaw's Real Canadian Superstores across the province of Alberta went on strike Sunday after failing to reach an agreement before the strike deadline of midnight Saturday.

Workers involved in the strike are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW). The same union signed a contract last week for locked-out workers at Loblaw stores in neighboring Saskatchewan after reaching a deal for workers in Manitoba the week before.

A central issue in the dispute is guaranteed work hours, which have been dramatically cut in recent years. According to the union, the wage increase that workers get is more than offset by the reduction in work hours.

Head of the Alberta Federation of Labour, Gil McGowan has threatened that there will be a boycott against Loblaw stores across the prairies if workers are not presented with a reasonable offer. McGowan has suggested that workers are being targeted for cutbacks so the company can continue to expand its retail empire with acquisitions such as the recent takeover of the Shoppers pharmacy chain.



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