

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 August 2015

Chilean mineworkers occupy mine to demand unpaid benefits, wages

Over 70 workers at a mine in the central Chilean coastal commune of Curanilahue descended 600 meters (2,000 feet) into the mine August 11 and vowed not to leave if they are not paid the wages and benefits due them.

The owner of the Santa Ana de Curanilahue mine, Rodrigo Danus, has not paid into the workers' social security fund for about a year, and did not pay their wages for July. When workers met with him to demand their wages, he told them that there was no money and that they would have to keep working to "generate resources" to pay them.

The workers are demanding a meeting that will include officials with the government health, geological/mining service, and labor ministries and a "valid interlocutor" from Santa Ana management.

Chilean contract copper mineworkers suspend strike, sign agreement

Representatives of contract mineworkers signed an agreement with Codelco, Chile's largest copper mining company and the Agema contractors association August 12, ending a strike begun July 21. The strike action, taken to demand job security and parity with full-time Codelco employees, included blockades and clashes with police. One worker died in the midst of a confrontation between striking workers and police.

Details of the agreement were scarce, apart from an Agema statement that the parties would renegotiate their contract terms and the contractors would not fire or retaliate against workers who had struck.

Brazilian autoworkers strike to protest layoffs

4,000 workers at a General Motors factory in San Jose dos Campos, about 50 miles from Sao Paulo, Brazil, went on strike

on August 10 to protest the recent dismissals of about 600 of their coworkers. On August 14, some 2,000 workers demonstrated, with some blocking the main highway between Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

The layoffs are part of a trend by the nation's automakers, who have let go of thousands of workers since the beginning of the year in the midst of an auto sales slump. Management at San Jose dos Campos had announced that the factory would not be included in \$1.9 billion of investment that GM plans to make in Brazil in the next four years because it is "not cost competitive."

Union leaders have made calls to ban foreign automakers from repatriating their profits and nationalize some auto plants. Though claiming, as one official said, "We will say 'no' to salary cuts and 'yes' to job security," union leaders propose the reduction of work hours instead of layoffs.

Panamanian banana workers end weeklong strike over health issue

Panama's Workers Syndicate and the Bocas Fruit Company in Bocas del Toro signed an agreement the night of August 15, ending a strike that lasted a week. The strike involved over 4,200 workers.

The workers had walked off the job as a rejection of a new system of fruit selection and washing, which saved on the cost of water, but which the union said could negatively affect the health of the workers. The method was introduced at a new packing plant, Finca 12.

In the terms of the agreement, Finca 12 workers will be transferred to other plants until September 15. In the interim, inspectors will determine if the Finca 12 plant is safe. According to the pact, Bocas will be obliged to habilitate the plant three times a week.

Trinidadian workers protest delays and political interference in salary negotiations

Workers for Trinidad and Tobago's National Insurance Board (NIB) protested at the Prime Minister's Office in St Clair August 11 to press their salary demands. The workers are demanding a raise of no less than 14 percent, which the government has agreed to in negotiations with other public sector workers.

The workers also protested interference by the Labour Ministry in negotiations. Terrence Regis, a representative of the protesting workers, told *Newsday* that at their third meeting, "Management said that they have exhausted all mandates given to them, and that their hands are tied... The executive director proceeded to say that because of this, the matter had to be referred to the Ministry of Labour, as a dispute."

Regis accused the ministry of "unnecessarily meddling in administrative details of the NIB," adding, "The policy of the Ministry of Labour to accept the matter as a dispute after only three meetings reflects a policy that discourages parties from freely negotiating, and making a sincere effort to achieve solutions bilaterally."

If the NIB workers cannot get salaries comparable to other state sector workers, Regis said that the workers may resort to strike action.

Nursing staff members for San Fernando General Hospital in Trinidad also held a spirited protest outside the facility on August 13. The demonstration and march, led by members of the TT Registered Nurses Association (TTRNA) and the National Health Workers Union (NHWU), protested inordinate procrastination by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health in settling wages.

The next day, hundreds of workers from several unions engaged in a protest outside the Prime Minister's Office in St Clair to demand that outstanding wage talks be settled. The action included workers from communications, postal, insurance and general labor sectors. Some of the wage issues have been unsettled for as long as six years.

Protest over Patriot Coal pension cuts

The United Mine Workers held a protest Monday against plans by Patriot Coal to eliminate its union contract and cut pension contributions.

The protest was held outside Patriot Coal headquarters in Scott Depot, West Virginia. Patriot Coal declared bankruptcy in 2013 and the moved to West Virginia, where it again sought bankruptcy protection. The company was spun off from Peabody Coal in 2007.

The coal operator is seeking approval from a bankruptcy judge to void its union contract and to approve a partial sale to Blackhawk Mining LLC. It is seeking to get rid of any obligation to pay into the 1974 UMWA pension plan.

The company has 2,870 full-time employees including 900 represented by the UMWA. That number is down from 4,000 employees in 2012.

Eastern Ontario city workers set to strike

Municipal employees of Loyalist Township west of Kingston, Ontario will be in a legal strike position this week after voting overwhelmingly on August 12 to reject the employer's final offer.

The 64 workers affected are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and include both inside and outside workers. Their last contract expired at the end of 2014 and the latest offer was for a four-year deal with 2 percent annual wage increases. The main issue in dispute is scheduling with the employer demanding greater "flexibility," a concession that workers resolutely oppose.

Sand and gravel workers locked-out in Calgary

Around 100 workers employed by BURNCO Rock Products Ltd. near Calgary, Alberta were locked-out last week and subsequently set up picket lines at the company plant in the town of Cochrane.

The workers are mostly truck drivers and are organized under the Teamsters union. Local union representatives say the company is demanding a number of concessions in a new contract, including the elimination of seniority and other provisions that amount to what they are calling an attempt to break the union.

The lockout notice was issued following a vote by workers in favor of strike action but before they could vote on the most recent contract offer.



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