

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 February 2016

Latin America

Chilean Copper Miners Protest Layoffs

Miners, members and supporters of the Mine Workers Front (FTM), responded on February 16 to a management plan for layoffs by blocking an entrance to the Soledad copper mine. The action followed the announcement on February 12 by the Anglo-American mining conglomerate that it would rationalize mining operations at the Soldado mine in the Antofagasta region of northern Chile. The rationalization plan, which would result in the sacking of 150 miners, is in response to the drastic decline in world copper prices.

Joining the Soledad miners were miners from the Escondida, Lomas Bayas, El Soldado and Mantos Blancos mines, also in the same region. Also participating were leaders of the Zaldivar Mine and of other unions in Antofagasta.

The FTM was formed only a few weeks ago in opposition to the wave of layoffs across the mine sector.

At the Serra Gorda mine, a second wave of layoffs began last week, following job cuts in November of nearly 100 workers. This time fifty jobs will be eliminated, for a total of 150.

Mexican agricultural workers intend to block auto plants

The Democratic Peasants Union (UCD) and the Union of Mexican Peasants and Emigrants (UCEM) announced their intentions last Thursday to block access to the Mazda plant in Salamanca, as well as the General Motors and Honda plants in Celaya and Silao in Guanajuato State.

At issue is the government's enforcement of legislation outlawing "chocolate" cars (imported directly by their owners from the United States). UCEM leader Aarón Cabañas declared his expectation that some ten thousand chocolate car owners would participate in the protests, most of them rural workers.

"We are demanding that the federal government adopt a new policy on cars from other countries, most of which are owned, in 95 percent of the cases, by agricultural workers, people with scant resources. So far this year federal authorities have confiscated 100 vehicles; those cars are not returned, and their owners are threatened with the charge of "trafficking." People get those cars from family members that work in the US because they cannot afford new cars assembled in the Guanajuato factories."

UCD leader Antonio Tirado Patiño said that the protests will also demand that federal authorities restore payments to agricultural workers contracted out to the US between 1942 and 1964 ("bracero" workers) who were cheated out of their wages by government through "savings accounts" that have never been fully accounted for.

Argentine Central Bank workers repudiate sackings

The union that represents Argentine bank employees (La Bancaria) began a protest with no end in sight on February 16 demanding the rehiring of fifty Central Bank employees.

General Workers Federation (CGT) leader, Antonio Caló, who just last week reached an agreement with President Mauricio Macri to suppress workers struggles over wages and jobs, participated in the first day of the protest and warned that similar layoffs are to take place in other banks. Bancaria leader Sergio Palazzo blamed the local workers commission for having negotiated the sackings.

Palazzo declared that the pickets are camped-out and set to block money trucks from leaving and entering the bank headquarters "until the issue is resolved."

Argentina: thousands demand Milagro Salas' release

Thousands of demonstrators, belonging to some forty community, union, and left groups, mobilized demanding the release of political activist Milagro Salas. The demonstrations marked the beginning of Salas' second month in jail by political authorities in the northeastern province of Jujuy, for leading protest demonstrations. Others were charged with the same crime, but so far have not been detained. Salas is the leader of Tupac Amarú, an organization named after an Inca leader and symbol of Inca resistance against the Spanish during colonial times.

This was by far the largest set of marches demanding Salas' release, and the biggest protest since Mauricio Macri became president last December 10. Over 40 marches took place across Argentina, double the number of protests that took place a week after Salas' arrest. The demonstrations that blocked roads and streets lasted nine hours.

Despite the peaceful nature of the protests—no incidents were reported—Jujuy authorities detained eleven members of Tupac Amarú who were on the way to the march to "check on their police record" and for "indiscriminate insults to the police".

In addition to the Jujuy marches, protests also took place in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Corrientes, Neuquén, La Rioja, Mar del Plata, Mendoza, Misiones, Neuquen, Río Turbio, Rosario, and Santa Fé (all industrial, mining, or port cities).

The organizations participating included the Peronist youth (Campora), Indian rights groups, Port workers (SUTAP), Public Employees (ATE).

Salas is a member of the Mercosur parliament, Parlasur, and is scheduled to be present on March 14, at the opening of this year's session.

Rio de Janeiro Olympics construction workers demand back pay

On Tuesday, February 16, 75 construction workers demonstrated at the Olympic Park to protest nonpayment of wages since December 2015. Antonio Alfredo da Silva Laeber, spokesperson for the construction union that organized the protest (Sintraconst-Rio), warned of possible job actions if the workers' demands are not met. "These massive buildings, these monumental stadiums, will not be finished," declared Silva Laeber. "It is absurd. These people are hungry, they don't have money to eat. Considering the size of this project, what is happening to us is not acceptable," he added.

Rio de Janeiro is scheduled to host the 2016 Summer Olympics this August.

The United States

Washington state meatpacking workers decertify union at Tyson plant

Meatpacking workers at the Tyson Fresh Meats plant in Wallula, Washington voted by an overwhelming margin to decertify the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. The results of an NLRB election were announced last week. Out of the 1,400 employees at the Wallula facility, the final tally was 686 in favor of removing the UFCW and a mere 129 voted to retain.

The struggle of Tyson workers at the Wallula plant speaks volumes about their frustration with pro-company policies of the labor bureaucracy. In 2005, workers removed the Teamsters as their bargaining representative of 25 years.

In 2007, 500 workers were laid off. Two years later, in 2009, they accepted representation by the UFCW. In November 2010, workers defeated a decertification attempt that was aided by the right-wing National Right to Work Foundation.

The most recent election did not involve the National Right to Work Foundation and took place on November 18. Last week's results will only be certified after a seven-day waiting period to allow for objections.

Minnesota janitors carry out 24-hour strike

Janitors who clean office buildings in downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul and across the suburbs walked off the job February 17 on a 24-hour strike to demand \$15 an hour for all workers and additional sick days. Some 4,000 janitors spread across the Twin Cities metropolitan area are represented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26 and work for cleaning companies such as ABM Janitorial Services, Marsden Building Maintenance, ABLE Building Maintenance and Harvard Maintenance.

Currently, full-time janitors make \$14.62 an hour and negotiators for the cleaners say they will raise wages to over \$15 an hour for these janitors. But they have refused to pay the same for part-time janitors who make between \$11 and \$13 an hour. Workers are also protesting heavy workloads.

Canada

Toronto municipal workers face more concessions

This past weekend, negotiators for 5,400 outside workers in Toronto accepted a tentative agreement with the City of Toronto. Workers will vote on the deal later this week. Although no details of the contract have been released, the city had been insisting on significant concessions from the union.

In addition, another 23,000 inside workers for the municipality continue to negotiate a separate collective agreement. The union has twice extended strike deadlines. Both bargaining units, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have been pressured by management to surrender concessions around issues of job security and benefits.

The city, which previously was responsible for all medical benefits coverage, has demanded that employees now pay ten percent. The employer is also demanding that control of pharmaceutical selection be taken away from employees' doctors and turned over to the insurance supplier. Concessions on sick pay provisions have also been tabled.

In addition, the city is seeking to further extend concessions on job security that it won in the 2012 contract negotiations. The employer is seeking further "flexibility" on contract language that will allow for more contracting out of work and part-time hiring.

In the 2012 contract rounds, the regime of former Mayor Rob Ford pushed through a contract that allowed for the outsourcing of hundreds of garbage collector jobs in the west end of the city. A day before the city was in a legal lockout position Ford had announced that he would unilaterally impose a new contract on the municipal workers. The union, without even organizing a strike vote, quickly buckled to Ford's demands.

In statements issued earlier in the month, CUPE negotiators for both the outside and inside workers have already bowed to the City regarding the need for further cost savings and have proposed a new strategy to pool all city employees' benefits, both union and non-union, to increase economies of scale. Both Tim McGuire, leader of the inside workers (Local 79) and Matt Alloway, spokesman for the outside workers (Local 416) had made it known that they did not intend to initiate a strike.



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