

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 October 2016

Mexico: Peñasquito mine to reopen following 12 days of protests

Transport workers and peasants lifted their barricades on Friday following 12 days of struggle at the Peñasquito gold mine in Zacatecas, Mexico.

Goldcorp, a Canadian transnational, had threatened to temporarily shut down Peñasquito, and to take the striking contract workers and peasants to court, arguing that negotiations were at a standstill.

The company had threatened to do away with many of the jobs contracted out to truckers, supposedly as a result of reduced output. In addition to demanding jobs in the mine, many of the peasants were protesting the use of water resources and pollution of water by the mine.

Following intervention by state government authorities, the company accepted an agreement with the strikers. It also will negotiate individually with the peasant farmers of the region, on the basis of the unlikely argument that each of the peasant households has different grievances.

Over 3,000 workers work directly for the mine. Another 7,000 jobs, such as the protesting truckers, are contingent on the mine's operation.

Mining output has been falling across the board in Mexico. The drop in gold production, in large part due to lower productivity at Peñasquito, has fallen 17 percent since 2014.

Guerrero students, educators commemorate Tlatelolco massacre of 1968

Students, educators and their supporters marched on October 2 along the highway that links Cuernavaca and

Acapulco to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre of October 2, 1968, in Mexico City and to demand an end to the state-sanctioned kidnappings and killings of students and social activists.

At a rally, union official (CETEG) Carlos Botello declared that this march was meant to give a message to officials at all levels of government, for an end to killings and persecutions that have taken place in Aguas Blancas and El Charco, both in Guerrero, and the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students. Botello also condemned the victimization, by the government of President Peña Nieto, of teachers who repudiate the class-based education reform.

Protest strikes by university professors in Argentina

On October 4, university professors carried out a 24-hour protest strike over wages. The educators are demanding a 15 percent raise to make up for an accelerating rate and increases to the university budget for 2017, plus the retention and expansion of social programs that make it possible for poor students to attend public universities.

The protest strike was triggered by the refusal of the government of President Mauricio Macri to discuss any of the professors' demands in September.

Since Macri assumed the presidency, Argentine trade unions, including the University Union (CONADU), for the most part have gone along with an informal agreement not to lead any serious opposition to draconian government austerity measures, isolating workers struggles and engaging in toothless protest actions such as the strike last Tuesday. A 48-hour protest strike is being planned on Thursday and Friday of this week.

Bank employees in Brazil sold out following a month-long strike

On Thursday, bank employees who had shut down 13,000 Brazilian banks (out of 23,544) returned to work. Union leader and strike spokesman Roberto Von der Osten (coordinator for the National Command of Bank Employees, a coalition of unions) immediately declared a “victory” for the strikers.

In reality, the workers are going back to work having accepted the original offer from the bank cartel: an 8 percent wage hike (that does not make up for last year’s inflation) and a signing bonus of 3,500 reais (US\$1,085), a far cry from the workers’ demands of 15 percent, a signing bonus of US\$2,600, better medical benefits, 20-day paternity leave, more generous meal vouchers, better working conditions, and a cost-of-living clause to protect their purchasing power.

From the very beginning of the strike, the National Command of Bank Employees had insisted on keeping the strike isolated from the rest of the bank workers and other sections of the working class. The walkout involved only 350,000 of the nation’s 504,000 employees, which Von der Osten insisted was “more than enough to pressure the bankers.”

He admitted, however, that the success of the strike would be made more difficult because big businesses do most of their banking online and fully 54 percent of all banking operations in Brazil take place through the Internet and at automatic tellers. In fact, “only 8 percent of bank transactions in Brazil” involve human tellers, according to Von der Osten.

The strike began on September 6 and was the longest banking strike in Brazil in 12 years.

Lockout at Missouri manufacturing plant

Milbank Manufacturing locked out 104 workers September 27 at its Concordia, Missouri, plant after negotiations failed to reach an agreement acceptable to workers. Back in September, workers rejected a contract that took away emergency vacation days, capped company health care contributions and does not

match wage expectations by workers.

Workers have been working mandatory overtime for the last two years and have been catching up production from another Milbank plant in Kansas City, Missouri, where workers are paid an average \$2.50 an hour more than workers in Concordia. Concordia workers are paid between \$14.00 and \$16.00 an hour.

Milbank also has a plant in El Dorado, Arkansas. Workers in Concordia are represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 124. A different union represents workers in Kansas City. The company builds commercial utility metering products.

Border bridge workers in southern Ontario set to strike

Forty-seven workers at the Blue Water Bridge in Point Edward, in southern Ontario near Sarnia, are set to go on strike if their employer, the Federal Bridge Corporation, fails to return to the bargaining table.

The workers, who include maintenance and toll staff, are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and have been working without a contract for almost two years. At the start of a 21-day cooling-off period, workers gave their union a strong strike mandate, putting them in a strike or lockout position since Monday of this week. Some of the issues in dispute include discipline procedures, scheduling, benefits and wage grids.

The employer has indicated that contingency plans are in place in the event of a strike. Blue Water Bridge connects Point Edward, Ontario, to Port Huron, Michigan, and is the second-busiest crossing between Canada and the US.



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