

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 March 2017

## Peruvian copper mineworkers walk out over wages, conditions

About 1,500 mineworkers at the Cerro Verde copper mine in Arequipa, Peru downed their tools on the morning of March 10 over wages and other demands. The walkout followed the breakdown of talks between management and union reps, who nonetheless said that they “left the door open” to dialog, an offer rejected by the company.

The company has had a profit-sharing system whose returns have steadily diminished since 2014, falling, for example, from 1,500 soles (US\$457) in 2015 to 276 soles (US\$84) in 2016. Workers now want a benefit payment to protect their incomes against downturns in copper prices.

Safety is another concern. In February, two workers were killed, and one seriously injured, in accidents at Cerro Verde. The strikers are demanding to have workers represented in the committee that investigates accidents, as established by law. In addition, they want regulations and obligations in the areas of safety and security to be updated.

Production has slowed, but not halted, since there are 1,300 employees and contract workers who do not belong to the union and have continued working.

## Strike by Chilean mineworkers completes one month

Workers at the Escondida copper mine complex in northern Chile remain on strike, over a month after walking out. The strike began February 9 over a number of demands, including a wage raise, a bonus, pay equity for new-hires and benefits. BHP Billiton, which owns the mine, claimed that falling copper prices and productivity made cutbacks in these areas necessary.

Some 2,500 workers remain at an encampment near the mine, with union head Carlos Allendes claiming, “We’re

fine. The compañeros remain in high spirits and unity stays very firm.”

According to a Reuters report, “The company has the right to use temporary replacement workers, but has previously said it would not exercise that right for the first 30 days, as it seeks to keep a lid on simmering tensions. It said Friday it ‘would evaluate day by day’ whether it may begin to use temporary workers.” Striking workers say that they will not allow contract workers to pass.

## Argentine teachers to hold two-day strikes over parity talks, salaries

Argentina’s Education Workers Confederation (CTERA) called a 48-hour strike for March 15-16 to demand that the Education Ministry hold parity talks and to express opposition to salary caps. CTERA recently rejected a raise offer of 18 percent, saying it would not keep up with the nation’s inflation rate. The teachers will also strike the following week, on March 21 and 22.

The walkouts will include “actions in the whole nation: acts, marches, open radio, educational forums ... and the passing out of leaflets,” according to a CTERA press release.

The Argentine Teachers Union (UDA) had advocated extending the stoppage to four days to include March 21 and 22, “in view of the lack of a call to national teachers’ parity talks and the failure and stalemate of negotiations in the majority of the provinces.” The Education Workers Union, based in Buenos Aires, announced that it would stop work on the March 21-22 as well, following its rejection of the city government’s offer.

## Guyanese sugar workers protest more planned closures of estates

Former and current sugar industry workers staged a protest in front of Guyana's Ministry and Parliament Building March 9. Some of the protesters were former workers for the state-run Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) Wales Estate, which was closed last year. They protested delays in receiving severance pay.

Others were employees of the Enmore and La Bonne Intention Estates, both of which have been proposed for closure, though no final decision has been made. The shuttering of the two estates would impact about 2000 workers.

### **Brooklyn recycling workers vote to unionize**

Sanitation workers at Sims Metal Management voted 46-20 to unionize the Brooklyn, New York state-of-the-art recycling facility under the Teamsters. The election took place against a backdrop of charges that the company sought to intimidate workers and block the organizing drive after the Teamsters obtained signatures from 70 workers who signed cards to join the union, which the company refused to accept.

Workers are demanding a retirement package and improved health insurance. One worker revealed he currently pays \$520 per month for his family for insurance, but the high deductible causes him to refrain from using it.

When Sims refused to accept a card vote or negotiate with workers, support began to build for a strike that would have backed up waste transfer stations across the city's five boroughs. According to a spokesperson, City Council Sanitation Committee Chair Antonio Reynoso was "concerned about the potential for a work stoppage."

After the union election, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio declared he looked "forward to continued cooperation and collaboration between Sims and the Teamsters."

### **Scabs used in Quebec zinc workers strike**

The Quebec ministry of labor has found that at least three strikebreakers have been employed in the month-old strike by 370 workers at the Noranda Cezinc plant in

Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, west of Montreal, in violation of provincial law.

Negotiators for the Syndicat des Métallos/United Steelworkers (USW), the union for striking workers, say that many more scabs have been used at the plant to keep it running up to 25 percent of normal capacity during the strike. The USW says that they are fighting numerous concessions and attacks on pensions in a new contract.

No talks are currently scheduled and union leaders have vowed to take the company to court to hold it accountable for its illegal actions.

### **Ontario Nissan dealership facing strike action**

Workers at Superior Nissan and affiliates in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, are poised to go on strike next week after voting unanimously in favor of strike action in their bid for a first contract.

The 25 workers are represented by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which has been negotiating since last July with Superior along with other dealerships in the area. Union negotiators say that talks broke down over wages and apprenticeship recognition in January, with the company offering an economic package they have called an insult.

Workers who would be affected by a strike as early as March 20 include technicians, service writers and parts personnel.



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