

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Strikes hit mines in Peru and Mexico as retired US coal miners face health care cutoff

18 April 2017

Peruvian mineworkers strike for improved profit sharing, medical services

An estimated 700 workers in Peru went on strike April 10 against several mines operated by the Southern Copper Corporation on April 10. The Unified Workers Syndicate (SUT) has demanded increases in profit sharing; improved medical services; reinstatement of Jorge Campos, SUT general secretary who was fired in 2016; and an end to spying on workers through cameras and sensors.

The miners held a rally in Ciudad Nieva near one of the mines run by Southern Copper, which is owned by Grupo Mexico, the world's third largest copper producer. The Labor Ministry declared the strike "inappropriate," one level below "illegal," which could trigger government intervention to break the strike. The walkout follows a nearly three-week strike at Peru's biggest copper mine, Freeport-McMoRan Inc.'s Cerro Verde, and a 43-day strike at the world's biggest copper mine in neighboring Chile, BHP Billiton's Escondida mine.

Mexican mineworkers return to work after 59-day strike

A strike by workers for Primero Mining Corporation's San Dimas complex, located in Durango, Mexico ended April 13 after 59 days. The Canadian-owned gold and silver company and the notoriously corrupt National Union of Mine and Metal Workers of the Mexican Republic (SNTMMSSRM) announced they had reached a new labor deal, which, they claim, resolved all the strike issues, and that operations would restart on Tuesday, April 18.

The mineworkers struck in response to an announcement by Primero that it would reduce its workforce by up to 300 workers to increase productivity and improve cash flow. The company had already cut its workforce by 17 percent in December.

The new agreement includes a base salary increase of 7.5 percent, just barely above the rate of inflation. According to tradingeconomics.com, "The [March] inflation rate accelerated for the ninth straight month, reaching the highest since July of 2009, mainly driven by prices of food, namely fruits and vegetables,"

reaching 5.35 percent. The deal also ties raises to increased output and more grueling schedules. This includes changing from three 8-hour shifts, 5.5 days per week to two 10.5-hour shifts, with underground workers on a 4-days-on, 2-days-off schedule, with 24/7 operation. At the same time, "The Company will continue to explore opportunities to make further reductions to the workforce," tradingeconomics.com reported.

Strikes by Argentine teachers, university staff and court workers

School teachers and court workers in Argentina's Santa Cruz province voted April 15 to carry out a five-day strike, from April 17 to 21, to demand payment of overdue salaries. Governor Alicia Kirchner, elder sister of the late former president Nestor Kirchner, has claimed since her inauguration in December 2015 that "the province is broke," and has declared the salary system invalid and unconstitutional.

Meanwhile educators and researchers at the University of Rosario rejected a government proposal for an 18 percent salary raise and have voted for a two-day strike, likely on April 21 and 24. Argentina's Educators and Researchers Association of the National University of Rosario (COAD) is calling for a 35 percent hike due to high inflation.

Trinidadian postal workers, landfill workers protest safety and health problems

On April 10, workers for the Beetham landfill in the northern San Juan/Laventille region gathered in front of the facility to protest hazardous fumes, poisonous chemicals and unhealthy conditions at the site. Located next to a swamp, the landfill is run by the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL).

The president of the Industrial General and Sanitation Workers Union, Robert Benacia, told reporters the union requested a meeting with the ministers of public utilities and finances to

discuss increasing funds to upgrade Beetham, but received no response. Benacia said SWMCOL workers are among the most poorly paid public workers in the two-island nation.

In the northern town of Piarco, over 100 workers for the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Service, known as TTPost, picketed its headquarters April 11. The protest was aimed at putting pressure on TTPost to meet with the Postal Workers Union to address health and safety issues. Among those issues are the lack of proper tools, equipment and uniforms, and safe working condition.

Thousands of coal miners face April 30 deadline for elimination of retiree health benefits

While President Donald Trump cynically postures as a champion of US coal miners, an estimated 22,600 retirees and surviving widows face the loss of health care benefits on April 30. The threatened cut off is the result of the near bankruptcy of the United Mine Workers Health and Retirement Fund, which is the result of the deliberate policy by the coal companies, including Peabody Energy, to use the bankruptcy courts to escape their financial obligations to miners and their dependents.

The UMW is telling miners and their families to place their faith in various Democrats and Republicans from mining states who are promoting the bipartisan Coal Miners Protection Act. The proposal would temporarily shore up the finances of the UMW-controlled retiree health funds, but would likely include some type of benefit cuts for current or future retirees.

Teamsters impose sellout agreement on *Chicago Tribune* drivers

Teamsters Local 727 has agreed to a new four-year deal for *Chicago Tribune* drivers that will merge the newspaper's and local union's pension funds and impose work rule concessions on workers. It also includes a buyout package to help the company rid itself of more senior, higher paid workers and replace them with drivers earning lower wages and benefits.

In 1986, more than 1,000 *Tribune* workers—including printers, typesetters and mailers—fought a more than year-long strike against the newspaper's attack on jobs and work rules. Despite widespread support in the working class, the Teamsters union ordered drivers to cross the picket lines, claiming they were upholding a no-strike clause, and after the Chicago Federation of Labor isolated the embattled workers, the company prevailed.

Illinois courthouse workers demonstrate over poverty wages

Courthouse workers for Bureau County demonstrated at the county board meeting in Princeton, Illinois to protest low pay in the wake of a paltry wage offer. Members of Teamsters Local 722, who receive a starting wage of \$10 an hour, warned the board they will not accept the current 35-40 cent wage increase proposal.

A union steward told the board that some courthouse workers “qualify for public aid while working two jobs.” The union is calling for a derisory \$12-an-hour starting wage and the adjustment of other wages that would leave Bureau County courthouse workers barely above poverty.

Ontario liquor board workers look to strike

7,500 workers employed by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), a government agency, are holding strike authorization votes this week in preparation for a possible walkout next week. The labor agreement covering these workers expired at the end of March.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) say they are fighting “creeping privatization” of the publicly owned retailer. The LCBO has increasingly relied on casual contract workers over full-time employees with over 80 percent of the largely female workforce now made up of casual employees. LCBO has faced erosion of its virtual monopoly of alcohol sales in Ontario in recent years with beer and wine now being sold in retail stores across the province.

Ontario bus driver fights anti-abortion ads

An unnamed female bus driver employed by public transit in the City of Peterborough, east of Toronto, was sent home last week for refusing to drive a bus displaying privately sponsored anti-abortion advertising.

A union spokesperson for the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union (ATU) says that the driver was concerned over comments from passengers and that forcing her to work in this situation violated her rights to a safe workplace. The worker has filed a grievance claiming the advertisement was offensive, discriminatory and poisoned her workplace.

The employer has denied she was sent home for her refusal and that it was a scheduling issue that prompted the decision. They did not deny that the situation might be repeated in the future.



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