

Peruvian miners launch national strike amid walkouts by doctors and teachers

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Peruvian miners strike

On Wednesday, July 19, miners in Peru launched a national strike of indefinite duration. The miners belong to more than 50 separate trade union locals representing more than 50 mines, including those at Peru's largest copper mines. The government of president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has declared the strike illegal, while government spokespersons are attempting to minimize the impact of the strike.

The strike takes place alongside a strike by teachers in the southern province of Cusco, now in its second month and a strike by doctors against the health ministry that began on July 4 (see below).

At issue in the miners strike is a new labor reform law that makes it easier to fire workers in large numbers, to force young miners to work in substandard conditions and to hire contingent and contract labor at half the pay of their permanent brothers and sisters. Peruvian miners are among the poorest paid in the world, with many earning 30 or 40 soles per day (9 to 12 US dollars). Hundreds of striking miners marched in Lima on Thursday. In addition to hunger wages, strikers denounced the super exploitation that miners experience, along with high temperatures and dangerous conditions.

Peruvian doctors strike

The strike that began on July 4 by Peruvian doctors employed by the health ministry (MINSA) is now entering its third week. The strikers are demanding budget increases for Peru's public health service as well as wage increases.

On July 17 strikers in Lima protested by chaining themselves to a hospital. This week they plan to initiate hunger strikes and mobilizations at hospitals across Peru. MINSA has declared the strike illegal, has so far refused to negotiate with the strikers.

Peruvian students protest in support of striking teachers

Students in the city of Puno, in southern Peru along the border with Bolivia, marched in support of their teachers on Monday, July 17. The educators, together with all Peruvian public school teachers, are participating in a national strike, now on its sixth week.

The students carried banners and shouted slogans rejecting privatization plans and demanding higher wages for their teachers. The teachers are also rejecting teacher performance standards.

The student protest was part of mobilizations across southern Peru by striking educators. In some of these protests the strikers confronted police sent to block their path.

Court workers on strike in Costa Rica

On Wednesday July 19, 13,000 judicial workers walked off their jobs to protest draft legislation that attacks their pensions. The protest strike began after the national legislature rejected union recommendations on pension reform.

Instead it opted for recommendations for the Pension Board (Supén) and from the Economic Science Institute (IICE), based on a study by the University of Costa Rica that found that judicial pensions are underfunded and proposes drastic reductions in benefits, an increase in the retirement age and higher contributions from court employees.

Argentina: Mass protests over firing of Pepsi Cola workers

On July 19, thousands mobilized in central Buenos Aires demanding that the government of president Macri intervene in the rehiring of some 600 sacked Pepsi Cola workers. On Thursday, July 13, workers occupying the plant were brutally attacked and expelled from the plant by security forces sent in by the right-wing government of Buenos Aires Province. Workers, who showed up for work only to find that the gates had been locked shut, insist that they were illegally laid off and are demanding that they be rehired and that the plant, which produces snacks, be reopened.

Pepsi Cola workers say that they were illegally fired because proper procedures have not been followed. The closure of the Pepsi plant comes on the heels of a wave of plant closures across Argentina, made possible by the pro-business Macri administration and compliant

union bureaucracy.

The demonstrators are also denouncing the brutal methods employed by police and gendarmes at Pepsi and elsewhere. Police attacks on demonstrators and strikers are becoming the norm under Macri, particularly in the city and province of Buenos Aires. The Pepsi closure follows a wave of recent plant closures, including the Sancor dairy, the Quilmes brewery, the Atucha nuclear power plant and others. In addition, there have been many reductions in personnel across Argentina.

Colombian small craft gold miners protest

Ten thousand small craft gold miners in the Department of Antioquia in central Colombia began a protest strike on July 21 against government policies that favor large mines and seek to eradicate them. An immediate issue is a contract between the miners and the transnational mining enterprises Gran Colombia Gold Corporation and Zandor Capital, which impose conditions that amount to slavery, according to a spokesperson Yarley Marin.

“They offer us contracts that amount to slavery, they want us to accept their contract to leave the territory. We have offered them other options, but they insist on contracts demanding 65 percent and letting us keep 35 percent, which is not enough to run a mine on,” declared Marin.

Tentative agreement reached in Rhode Island casino strike

Contract negotiators for Twin River Casino in Lincoln, Rhode Island, and Teamsters Local 251 reached a tentative agreement July 18 in the wake of a three-day strike by 42 valet workers. Workers still have to ratify the new three-year agreement, which provides for 3 percent annual wage hikes and purports to improve health benefits.

Management’s previous offer included language that provided the casino with the right to lay off all parking valets and resort to a subcontractor to hire new workers. Workers walked off the job July 14 and returned two days later. During the strike, bartenders, servers, clerks, skilled maintenance and other union workers honored the valets’ 24-hour picket lines.

Teamsters officials claimed the strike was called only “to make a statement” and that it ended the strike after 40.5 hours so as not to inconvenience other workers on sympathy strike. At the same time, the union admitted, “Rhode Islanders see growing inequality” and this especially applies to the parking valets, who make as little as \$4.50 an hour, not including tips. A state budget estimated that the casino raked in \$444 million from its video-gambling terminals alone in 2016.

B&H warehouse workers fight to defend jobs

Facing the loss of around 330 jobs, workers at two warehouses in the Brooklyn borough of New York City have been carrying on a

campaign against B&H, the largest US retailer of photographic and video equipment. Workers and supporters have been conducting twice weekly pickets since March.

After a year of futile negotiations under the auspices of the United Steelworkers, in January 2017 management said it would close both of its Brooklyn warehouses and open a warehouse in Florence, New Jersey. This location is 75 miles away from the outer boroughs where most of the workers live and without direct access to public transportation. The mostly Latino workers, whose starting wage is \$11 an hour, would find the cost of a car, tolls and gas unaffordable, in addition to having to add one and a half unpaid hours of travel in each direction to their workday. These workers, many with 15 years or more at B&H, would thus not be able to keep their jobs.

Winnipeg facing airport strike

One hundred fifty workers at James Armstrong Richardson International Airport in Winnipeg, Manitoba, are set to go on strike this week after their union, the Union of Canadian Transportation Employees (UCTE), issued a 72-hour strike notice last Friday.

Workers at the airport voted in favor of strike action last week. But after setting an initial deadline for this past weekend, union leaders chose to postpone any strike action for at least two days. Job action would include managers and administrative staff as well as IT and maintenance staff who have been without a contract for over a year. The union has said they are fighting job losses and contracting out of work in a new contract with the Winnipeg Airport Authority.

The employer has said that they have contingency plans in place and do not expect any disruption to service in the event of a strike.

B.C. copper workers look to strike

After working without a contract for nearly a year, nearly 1,000 workers at Highland Valley Copper near Logan, British Columbia, voted almost unanimously (99.8 percent) in favor of strike action last week.

Negotiators for the United Steelworkers Union (USW) say that Teck Resources, which owns the mine, is trying to contract out union jobs and increase the use of casual labor. In addition the company has rejected every proposal from the union, including for improvements to wages and benefits.

Talks were stalled for over five months before the union asked the company to return to the bargaining table in June, but negotiations broke down almost immediately. Only then did the union call a strike vote, the results of which put them in a legal strike position as of this past weekend, however no strike date has been set.



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