

Colombian coal miners protest new work schedule; Phoenix delivery drivers threaten walkout over COVID concerns

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 August 2020

Coal miners in northern Colombia rally to protest new work schedule

On July 30, Colombian coal miners at the Cerrejón mine in northeastern Colombia rallied to protest the impending firing of 1,200 miners due to the implementation of new work schedules beginning this month as part of an effort by the mine's owner, the transnational corporation Anglo-American, to boost profits. The mine employs 4,000 workers.

Miners denounced the new schedule, a draconian 12 hours per day for seven days straight, followed by three days off, as a "schedule of death." The new schedule will affect 4,000 workers in the production and maintenance departments. The resulting speedup is expected to reduce the labor force by 25 percent.

The labor cost saving is affecting an aging workforce at the mine. Over 60 percent of the workers have between 25 and 30 years of seniority. The old schedule, developed 30 years ago by a committee of experts, consisted of a rotation of 12 hours a day for three days, followed by three days of rest. Under that schedule, hundreds of the coal workers suffer from severe diseases associated with mine work.

Presently the mine is operating at 80 percent capacity due to the coronavirus pandemic. About 1,000 workers have been laid off, with government mandated compensation.

Anglo-American management is pressuring the coal workers with threats of an end to unemployment compensation for the laid-off miners unless workers accept the new schedule. Anglo-American management claims that the new schedule is already widely used in Colombian mines.

Venezuela oil workers demand pay raises

On July 28, oil workers protested and rallied at refineries, banks and government agencies across the oil-producing districts in Venezuela. Oil workers' wages, like all wages in Venezuela, have lagged behind the cost of food and other necessities. The oil workers are demanding that wage increases that make up for that and a contract that ties their pay to the rising inflation and cost of living. The demonstrators also demand the release of oil workers jailed in past protests.

Driving the protests are government policies that continue to drive workers into hunger, coupled with repression and attacks on democratic rights.

Phoenix warehouse and delivery drivers threaten to strike over COVID concerns

Over 220 warehouse and delivery workers at a US Foods distribution facility in Phoenix, Arizona voted by a 96 percent margin to strike unless the company makes serious efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Frank Solis, president of Teamsters Local 104, which represents the workers, stated, "We are concerned that the company's refusal to follow CDC COVID-19 guidelines could turn the company's Arizona operations into a hub for spreading the virus to struggling schools, hospitals and restaurants."

US Foods is the second largest food distributor in Arizona, with clients who operate schools, hospitals and nursing homes. Workers accuse the company of

ignoring CDC COVID-19 guidelines for pre-screening employees entering the facility and not performing contact tracing when workers are exposed to the virus.

The union also charges the company with forcing drivers to make deliveries to facilities with known cases of COVID-19. Workers are not being issued sufficient supplies of hand sanitizer and disinfecting sprays for trucks.

The strike threat follows a number of unfair labor practices actions by the Teamsters against US Foods and Local 104 is currently engaged in a long-drawn-out contract struggle at the Phoenix facility in which workers are demanding additional sick leave and hazard pay

Workers at New York pump manufacturing plant strike

About 170 workers who manufacture pumps at the Xylem Inc. facilities in Seneca Falls and Auburn, New York went on strike July 26 after members of the United Steelworkers of America (USW) Local 9832 overwhelmingly voted down the company's latest offer. At issue are 401(k) retirement plans and cuts in health care benefits.

The tier of younger and low seniority workers do not have the superior defined benefit retirement plan that older workers have and are demanding improvements to the 401(k) plan. Meanwhile, older workers are opposed to the company's attempt to put an end to free medical benefits that continue on into retirement.

The Xylem workers make pumps that are sold under the brand name Goulds Water Technology. Striking workers have received support from the several hundred workers at the ITT Gould Pump plant in Seneca Falls.

British Columbia technicians near one year on strike

About 120 telecommunications workers in

Coquitlam, British Columbia will soon enter their 12th month on strike. The fiber-optic technicians, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), struck for a first contract last September after being certified for union representation in August 2017. They say their employer, Ledcor Corporation, was unwilling to bargain a first contract.

Initially, 240 workers had been certified under the IBEW bargaining unit. However, the giant multinational construction company whittled down the workforce by almost half through sub-contracting schemes and slowdowns due to the COVID crisis. The technicians are fighting to protect wages, jobs and ever-increasing demands to step up the pace of work in the field due to an onerous quota system.

The record of Ledcor in its treatment of not only the Coquitlam workers, but also thousands of other construction workers in its many operations, has received praise from business organizations and publications that have consistently glowingly rated Ledcor for its "workplace culture."



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