Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 June 2022

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ArcelorMittal steelworkers at plant in Mexico hold strike over profit sharing demand

Workers at an ArcelorMittal steel company plant in Mexico's Michoacán state voted unanimously to strike June 15 to press their demand for a higher profit-sharing arrangement. Some 3,500 direct employees walked off the job at noon the next day.

Union and company representatives had been holding contract talks for 40 days without coming to an agreement. In its announcement of the strike call, the union accused ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, of violating workers' rights and of refusing to grant 10 percent of the profits for fiscal year 2021. A union spokesman cited a labor reform that went into effect last year changing the workers' status from outsourced employees to full company workers.

With this change in status, each worker's profit-sharing and productivity bonuses should increase from 176,000 pesos (US$8,630) that the company intended to pay to 300,000 pesos (US$14,712), according to the union. Workers have also accused the company's general director of laying off workers and lowering wages, while making remaining workers put in overtime.

The strike, however, was brief. The union announced June 17 that ArcelorMittal had agreed to pay the 10 percent. The striking workers were ordered back to their jobs. The company did not immediately issue a public statement.

Mexican arbitration board orders end to teachers' strike over wage demand

Mexico City's Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JLCA) ruled June 17 that a strike at 26 high schools of the city's Institute of Higher Secondary Education (IEMS) was "nonexistent" and ordered the teachers union to resume classes in 24 hours. The strike was in its ninth day at the time of the ruling.

A general assembly had voted for the strike, which began on June 8, to demand that the authorities improve on their meager 3.5 percent salary raise proposal, which lagged far behind inflation.

The JLCA stated that the vote to strike on June 8 was held in violation of the union's statutes and that there was not a quorum, an assertion contradicted by the union. The court claimed "a lack of legitimacy on the part of the union ... to carry out the outbreak of the strike movement." The order included a warning that the contractual relationship would be voided for any teachers who did not return to their posts, and they could be terminated and replaced.

The union said that it would challenge the ruling in court and request a provisional injunction, but the teachers would return to work while awaiting a judge's ruling. On June 19, it was reported that the union held a general assembly in which workers accepted the 3.5 percent wage increase and a 2 percent raise in benefits. A report by mvsnoticias.com noted, "In addition, the commitment of the authorities to review complaints against officials of the institution, payment of 100 percent of lost wages and that there will be no reprisals for those who have participated in the strike.

Chilean copper production workers protest planned closure of smelting plant

Protests broke out June 17 among workers at a copper smelter in Quintero, a city in Chile's Valparaíso province, following the announcement of the planned closure of the facility. Protesters set up incendiary barricades along streets in the vicinity of the company. The Federation of Copper Workers (FTC) said that it would call a national strike against the closure.

The smelter, part of the state-owned National Copper Corporation of Chile (Codelco), has been blamed for environmental contamination that has sickened dozens of people in the area. Authorities declared an environmental emergency, and Codelco stopped work at the Ventanas smelter and refinery earlier in June for maintenance.

However, rather than invest in measures to upgrade the facility, the executive board decided to close down the plant. Workers have accused the president of Codelco's board of directors, Máximo Pacheco, of planning to close Valencia and other smelters in the country in order to privatize the smelting process sector.

The FTC said in a June 18 statement: "According to the agreement adopted with the support of our union [membership], we will begin to prepare from this minute the national strike in all Codelco divisions. Our action will continue as long as the government and the Codelco Board of Directors insist on the closure of Ventanas and do not [provide] the resources to allow the Codelco smelters to continue as competitive and sustainable units."

Chicago-area operating engineers strike rock quarries

Some 300 heavy equipment operators who produce sand, gravel and crushed rock for the Chicago-area construction industry went on strike June 7. The International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 did not reveal what the disputed issues are in the negotiations, but only said it was an Unfair Labor Practices strike.

The Operating Engineers is bargaining with the Chicago Area Aggregate Producers Association, which represents three companies: Lehigh Hanson, Vulcan Materials and Holcim. The union said the companies' "refusal to schedule negotiations needlessly jeopardizes construction projects across the industry ... "

The aggregate mix produced by Local 150 members is essential in the production of asphalt and cement. The strike has the potential to shut down road projects as well as idle building construction. The last strike by Local 150 workers who produce aggregate from the quarries was in 1967.

In a related dispute, on June 13 workers at the Indian Point Quarry north of Springfield, Illinois walked off the job to demand higher wages and resolve safety issues. The strike involves 6 members of Teamsters Local 916 and another 14 members of the International Union of Operating Engineers who have a joint contract with Hanson Material Services, the company that owns the quarrying operation.

The old agreement expired April 30 and workers voted unanimously to strike.

Group of New Jersey Amazon Flex drivers stage protest

A group of 15 Amazon Flex drivers in Avenel, New Jersey walked off the job Saturday morning to protest a wage cut. According to a news release the company had cut wages from $38 per two-hour delivery block to $34 per block. Workers stood by the side of the road chanting and holding a giant cutout head of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

The workers' news release pointed to soaring gas prices in New Jersey and demanded a minimum $5 tip per delivery, double pay for deliveries over 18 miles, and an end to punitive measures for traffic delays outside workers' control.

Surging gas prices have hit Amazon Flex drivers hard, since the workers use their own vehicles for delivery.

Boston Harbor container terminal shut down after truck driver struck and killed at site

The Conley Container Terminal in Boston Harbor was shut down June 15 after a truck driver was struck and killed by a tractor trailer at the facility. According to a press statement the dead driver worked for a private trucking company. Conley is owned and operated by the Massachusetts Port Authority, a quasi state agency.

The operators of the terminal said an investigation was being conducted. According to state police the 41-year-old man was standing outside his own truck at 11:40 a.m. when the accident happened. The worker was pronounced dead at the scene.

Manitoba Hydro natural gas workers begin rotating strikes

About 230 natural gas workers, members of Unifor, began a series of intermittent, rotating strikes this past Friday to press for a significant wage rise. The workers are the lowest paid trade in the thousands-strong Manitoba Hydro Crown Corporation. They have been without a contract since December 2020. The crown corporation has recorded record profits in recent years, including a projected net profit of $430 million for the current year.

Although Unifor has threatened other similar limited walkouts over the next 60 days, they have yet to announce any schedule for further job action.

The toothless tactic of limited strikes resembles the efforts of other unions in the province's network of crown corporations during contract disputes, who have carried out limited actions aimed mainly at dissipating worker anger while imposing minimal disruption to operations. A provincial labour law allows for the Labour Board to end a strike or lockout after 60 days and impose binding arbitration. Last year, 2,300 electrical workers in the IBEW undertook similar brief and occasional rotating strikes. After 60 days, the dispute went to an arbitrator who granted a wage increase that failed to match inflation rates.

That contract closely mirrored the province's Conservative government's 2017 unlawful wage restraint legislation. Even though a provincial court, calling the bill "draconian," had struck down the legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to free collective bargaining, the government refused to abide by the ruling and launched an appeal.