

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 November 2010

Chilean women occupy mine in hunger strike

Thirty-three women began a hunger strike November 16 after occupying the defunct Chiflon del Diablo mine near the town of Lota in southern Chile. The women had been employed as part of an emergency program resulting from the powerful earthquake that devastated central and southern Chile in February. The earthquake registered at 8.8 on the Richter scale and caused more than 400 deaths and \$30 billion in damages.

Close to 19,000 jobs have been eliminated as the program has been phased out in the O'Higgins, Maule and Bio Bio regions. The women launched the protest to draw a parallel with the miners who were trapped for 70 days in the San Jose mine.

Lota has suffered from high unemployment since the shuttering of the Chiflon del Diablo mine—the town's principal employer—in the 1990s. The mine is now part of a tourist circuit of old mines and brings in about 400,000 Chilean pesos (US\$833) a day from tours and souvenirs.

The women have requested the intervention of the archbishop of Concepcion and the regional governor to urge the government to amend Chile's 2011 budget to include reinstatement.

Radio Cooperativa reports that “last week some 2,000 people gathered at La Moneda [Chile's presidential palace] and the National Congress to ask that they be heard by the authorities, but they have not received any response.” Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter was quoted as saying the women were “lucky” to have had the jobs for a few months.

“We are going through a very difficult phase and we are reaching the ultimate consequences. This is what the government really wants to see, because they haven't listened to us, they haven't opened the doors to us,” protest spokesperson Ivannia Anabalon told Radio Cooperativa.

Mexican teachers strike over nonpayment of social security

Classes in the state of Veracruz were suspended on November 19 as teachers stopped work due to debts owed by the secretary of education of Veracruz to teachers' social security funds. Outstanding payments owed come to about 3,500,000,000 pesos (US\$285 million).

Members of the SUTSEM state workers and teachers union told Conexion Total that the actions would continue until the government fulfills payments corresponding to union payments held since several months ago.

The SUTSEM members said that their petition conforms to the constitutional and legal provisions of the organization.

They explained that there are teachers with careers of 20 years “who do not count on social security because the authorities did not cover the worker-management quotas to the Mexican Institute of Social Security.”

Uruguayan union federation holds five-hour strike over wages and Amnesty Law

Uruguay's PIT-CNT union federation called a five-hour strike on November 17, the fifth since the start of the presidency of the Frente Amplio's Jose Mujica. Wages and a call for reform of the 1986 Amnesty Law were the focus of the stoppage.

The PIT-CNT campaigned for Mujica's election, but promised progressive social and economic measures failed to materialize. The federation has issued calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth and higher

wages.

The PIT-CNT is also appealing for a ratification of a draft amnesty law that will replace the current law, which was declared unconstitutional at the beginning of November. Under that law, police and military personnel who committed human rights violations during the 1973-1985 military dictatorship were shielded from prosecution. The new law has passed in the House of Representatives but faces opposition in the Senate.

Partial strike called by Uruguayan commercial and industrial employees federation

The Uruguayan Federation of Commercial and Industrial Employees (Fueci) approved a protest and partial work stoppage for November 26 at supermall Montevideo Shopping. The action was called after management representatives obtained an extension for salary negotiations for next year.

During prime shopping hours, workers will mobilize to block several key entrances to the mall. “We’re going to block the entrance and we’re going to give information to people, inside as well as outside of Shopping.”

Fueci president Ismael Fuentes explained to 180 that workers want to get salaries installed this year. “We all know that in January and February you don’t find anybody to meet with, so that negotiations go on to March or April. We want it to be immediate so that we get the adjustments in January.”

About 80 unions make up Fueci, and the federation plans to bring in about 2,000 workers from the interior as well as from Montevideo.

Oregon hospital workers protest benefit cuts

Hospital workers carried out a 12-hour strike November 17 at the McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center in Springfield, Oregon, to protest management attempts to cut health care benefits. More than 200

members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49 took part in the strike. The action involved health unit supervisors, nursing assistants, and ultrasound and surgical techs.

Hospital management has offered the SEIU a 1.4 percent wage increase, but the additional costs to workers for health care coverage will translate into thousands of dollars of lost income. The old agreement, which expired on June 30, had health care plans that covered 80-90 percent of medical premiums and 75 percent of dental premiums.

The SEIU has also filed unfair labor practices charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging the hospital has not justified the drastic cuts in health care, has denied union requests for information, and has stalled negotiations with frequent walkouts. Another charge involves management attempts to prevent workers from discussing contract issues at the workplace and supervisors threatening to fire workers who engage in strike activity.

Strike and lockout ends at Quebec packaging giant

One hundred forty workers at Smurfit-Stone Container Corporation in La Tuque, who were locked out after rejecting the company’s last offer, have voted to accept that same contract under pressure from their own union.

The strikers are mostly machine workers represented by UNIK, an independent union. UNIK justified resubmitting the old contract to another vote on the grounds that it did not have the resources to maintain a protracted strike.

Smurfit-Stone, based in Chicago, Illinois, is one of the largest manufacturers of packaging materials in North America and claimed that the dispute did not disrupt deliveries to its customers.



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