

All-out Strike for 3300 Canadian Miners Over Pay and Pensions

Joy Macready Tue, 17/11/2009 - 14:16

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Over 3300 Canadian miners are continuing an all-out strike action against the Brazilian mining company Vale Inco to defend their wages, terms and pensions. The strike, now entering its 18th week, consists of production and maintenance workers from Sudbury and Port Colborne, Ontario, and Voisey's Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Vale is the second largest mining company in the world. Vertically integrated, it owns its own transportation networks, ports and processing plants across the planet. Its mines and smelters can be found in all corners of the globe - in Europe, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Indonesia, Mongolia, Congo, Guinea, Angola, Mozambique and Namibia. In October 2006, Vale paid US\$19.4 billion to buy Inco, an iconic company that had mined nickel in Sudbury since 1915 - where Inco's 700-foot-high smokestack acts a tourist attraction.

And after three waves of redundancies in three years, Vale is demanding that workers accept a three-year wage freeze and a two-tier pension scheme, exempting new employees from its defined-benefit pension plan, which guarantees employees a reliable, steady income after retirement. The company is proposing to provide them with a defined-contribution plan, which bases retirement benefits on investment returns.

The company is also pushing for the virtual surrender of a 700,000 dollar nickel bonus that had provided workers with enhanced payments whenever nickel prices soar on the world market. The bonus had been negotiated in the 1980s as a trade-off for years of wage restraints.

Vale has insisted that if its operations are to be sustainable in all pricing cycles a unified approach to compensation across the globe requires that Canadian workers become more competitive with workers in less developed countries. In other words, it is a race to the bottom for its workers across the globe.

Yet the company is making massive profits. In the past two years, the Inco operation has produced \$4 billion in company profits. Internationally, Vale's net income for the year ended 31 December 2008 was \$13.2 billion.

Confronted with attack after attack, the Canadian miners had had enough - they downed their tools and walked off the job on 13 July.

Scab labour

In order to break the strike, Vale Inco is playing hardball. In mid-October, management partially restarted mining operations at its main site in Sudbury by using its pool of 1,200 managerial, technical and clerical workers who are employed at the mining complex but are either non-union or organised in a United Steelworkers (USW) local that is not on strike - for example management has instructed some 50 technical

workers organised by USW Local 2020 to take part in the scabbing operation because earlier in their careers they were given some basic core-mining training.

This is unacceptable - workers from the same union must never cross picket lines and undermine the collective action of other workers. The striking workers must take this fight into the union and demand support for their action, in the same way they would support these workers during industrial action.

Vale also stated that it will bring in some 'third parties' to assist in training the white collar staff to perform the jobs of the striking miners and mill workers. In a further provocation, management has increased its camera surveillance of the picket lines and posted a warning to workers that the company 'will respond quickly to any and all (picket line) incidents should they occur?.

Looking to the law courts for help against scab labour is a dead end. In this case, the Ontario Labour Relations Board dismissed a bid to stop the company using non-striking office employees to fill in for picketing mill and mine workers, despite the union's argument that this had created an "inherently hazardous workplace".

Only collective action by workers will put an end to scabbing. Picketing workers and supporters need to take the argument against scabbing to the strikebreakers themselves and appeal to their class interests: they are weakening the working class' fight to defend jobs and conditions, and that the strikebreakers' future conditions will also suffer if this struggle is lost. The aim is to persuade the strikebreakers to refuse to scab, to join the union, and to fight for their right to work in a unionised workplace.

Dissuading scabs can lead to physical confrontation ? when that happens the police will act to try to break up the strike, and will even try to arrest and charge strikers. It is important, as the strike develops, to create picket defence squads, organised from the rank and file, to protect union action from police repression.

Solidarity - Local and International

This is a hard struggle as nickel mining is the life and blood of these northern communities in terms of the local economy and employment. The strike is costing the strikers' families about C\$4 million a week in lost wages. Yet the strike is solid and garnering support locally and internationally.

Quickly the local community responded by forming Families Supporting the Strikers group. The support group is about "members helping members" with everything from clothing exchanges to a food bank to a drop-in centre. One organiser, Kari Cusack, summed up the struggle perfectly: "This fight is about the future of our community. We can't just sit on the sidelines. There's a place for union family members on the picket lines, at the union hall and reaching out to our community."

The striking workers are all forging international links. Unions representing workers at the Vale Inco nickel mine in New Caledonia, a French dependency in the Pacific, have agreed to back strike action taken by their counterparts in Ontario. Vale workers in Brazil are supporting the action because they know unless the best organised remain strong they will have no chance of achieving the improvements on wages and pensions they hope for in their country.

The Worker's Force trade union welcomed two strikers and a representative from USW as part of a global push for support by the union, which has also held talks with Vale workers in Australia.

Across the world, protests are rising. USW members have held protests in Toronto, Sudbury, New York and at Vale's headquarters in Rio de Janeiro to draw attention to the ongoing strike.

In the UK, Unite, which has created a new international union, Workers Uniting, together with the USW, has organised a demonstration outside an investors conference in the City of London, where Vale Inco representatives are making a presentation to shareholders. The intention is to embarrass the company, disrupt their relationships with their investors and demonstrate the reach of the global union.

We won't pay for their crisis!

In every country, workers face a similar future: rising unemployment, declining wages and economic depression. Miners across the globe must reject the demands of Vale Inco that they pay for the world capitalist crisis. They can lead the working class resistance to wage-cutting, union-busting and the privatisation of public and social services.

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