

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 December 2002

Police attack striking doctors in El Salvador

On December 27, forces of the National Police of El Salvador occupied two hospitals of the Social Security Institute, where doctors and health care workers have been on strike since September. The assault occurred after strikers rejected President Francisco Flores' ultimatum to return to work with a \$1,500 advance or be fired.

Eight hundred out of the one thousand public health doctors who work for the Social Security Institute are participating in the strike, demanding the Flores government rescind plans to privatize health care.

Chilean teachers take mayor hostage

On December 23, 150 Chilean teachers in the city of San Fernando took the city's mayor hostage, in a protest to demand back pay. Mayor Jose Figueroa, a Communist Party member, was released following tense negotiations with Colchagua provincial authorities. San Fernando teachers have not been paid their November salaries.

In return for the mayor's release, the authorities agreed to pay the teachers 80 percent of their back wages plus a traditional Christmas bonus. The rest of the money is due January 6. There were no further incidents.

A budget shortfall has led municipal authorities to cut the school year short, ending classes on December 11.

Ecuadorian construction workers strike

Two hundred construction workers on a flood control project on the Chone River in Ecuador went on a 48-hour strike on Christmas Eve and the day after the holiday to demand back pay. On December 24 the workers took over the facilities of contractor Junco Patino to press management for four weeks' back pay.

The company pays the workers with checks drawn on an account in the Bank of Guayaquil. Workers are forced to go to a nearby town to cash their paychecks. Last week they found that there were no funds in the company account. The two-day strike ended when Junco Patino began paying workers in cash.

Brazilian hospital workers strike

Three hundred eighty health care workers at the Santa Casa de Jacarei hospital in the Paraiba Valley, northeast

of Sao Paulo, went on strike on December 27. The workers are demanding payment for their thirteenth month, a traditional Christmas bonus in the southern cone countries of South America. The strike includes nurses, helpers and maintenance workers. Medical doctors announced that, though they supported the strike, they would continue working. Nurses say that they will staff emergency services only during the strike.

The strikers set up camp in front of the hospital to press their demands. The hospital says that it lacks sufficient funds to pay the bonus month. Santa Casa sees 400 patients daily.

US Airways reaches tentative agreement with machinists union

US Airways and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) reached a tentative agreement the week before Christmas, giving a total \$59 million in concessions to the bankrupt company.

The agreement covering 6,200 mechanics provides \$45 million in givebacks while another 4,900 IAM members who comprise the Fleet Service employees will concede \$14 million. Among the concessions are productivity enhancements, staffing flexibility and modifications to medical benefits.

The agreement also has a built-in "War/Terrorism Contingency" concession clause that stipulates, "In the event that (a) the US invades Iraq ... or (b) there is an act of terrorism which in either event has a material adverse impact on commercial aviation, there will be an immediate 5% pay deferral of base pay implemented for all employees for up to 18 months."

Under the stipulation of the wartime pay cut accepted by the IAM bureaucracy the deferral will only be suspended if US Airways should report a quarterly pretax profit. In the first month after the pay cut ends money is supposed to be repaid on a monthly basis corresponding to the total length of the deferral. However, like stock ownership plans and other pay deferrals, the clause is subject to abuse by corporate management.

Contract talks break down in Hawaii nurses strike

Negotiations between Honolulu's Queen's Medical Center and the Hawaii Nurses Association broke off December 26, after hospital management refused to consider union counterproposals to its latest offer. Union negotiators sought to make proposals in the area of paid time off and mandatory overtime but a Queen's spokeswoman said the hospital proposal "must remain intact."

The hospital wants to take away sick days and substitute a plan to offer paid time off to those nurses who maintain good attendance records. Nurses maintain there is a connection between understaffing, long hours and the resulting loss of work through sickness among nurses, not to mention dangers for patient safety.

Union negotiators said they would consider the hospital's proposals for paid time off if management would supply supporting documentation. If hospital claims of excess absenteeism were supported by the documentation, the union offered to agree to the paid time off in the third year of the contract. Hospital officials, however, have declined to provide the additional information.

Some 800 nurses struck Queen's Medical Center three weeks ago. Another 540 nurses also struck the Kuakini and the St. Francis medical centers.

Verizon orders overtime in wake of mass layoffs

Just days after Verizon Communications laid off thousands of workers, the telecommunications company ordered thousands of repair technicians in New York State to work mandatory overtime.

Verizon announced plans to lay off 3,500 workers in northeastern part of the nation—2,370 in New York alone. Verizon declined to say how many workers were forced onto overtime. An official of the Communications Workers of America said 40 percent of the 1,000 workers in New York's Suffolk County alone were called up. The union filed grievances in cases where workers clocked more than the 10 hours overtime per week limit stipulated in the labor contract.

The move came during contract talks in which the company made an offer to the union that would forego layoffs if workers accepted a pay freeze, a reduction in hours, loss of sick pay, overtime and increased payments for medical insurance.

Toronto area teachers set to strike

Twenty-four hundred elementary school teachers with the Durham District School Board north of Toronto voted overwhelmingly in December to go on strike in the new year if a deal is not reached.

Months of contract negotiations have proved fruitless at what is one of the most poorly funded school boards in the province. Though the average teacher in Ontario gets 150 minutes a week of classroom preparation time, a Durham teacher gets only 135 minutes. School boards across the province, working within the Tories' restrictive funding formula, have taken an aggressive stance against teachers in contract talks in recent months, and many have been unable to submit budgets within existing funding.

The Durham school board has said that there was no money for salary increases in the 2003 operating budget but that a recent announcement for increased funding from the provincial government offers some new hope. The government has promised funding to provide a 3 percent salary increase to teachers in response to a report recommending the restoration of funding which had been cut over the past five years.

Edmonton air traffic controllers begin job action

Air traffic controllers at Edmonton International Airport began a limited job action over the holidays to protest increased workloads that have mounted over the past year. The controllers' actions are restricted under Canadian Industrial Relations Board and the number of flights cannot be affected.

Although their action is not expected to disrupt air traffic immediately, they will place limitations on the amount of overtime they will work, which is anticipated to provoke a showdown in the coming weeks due to the resulting staff shortages at control towers. The workers are represented by the Air Traffic Controllers' Association and are also refusing to help train new staff or allow back-up workers on the job.



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