

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 August 2003

Health workers strike in Uruguay enters its third week

Twelve thousand public health workers in Uruguay have set August 26 as the “startup” day to extend to the entire country their strikes and occupations of public hospitals. The strike began two weeks ago. Up until now four hospitals have been taken over by the workers. Two unions are involved, the Medical Syndicate (SMU) and the Federation of Public Health Employees (FFSP).

Last week doctors rejected the most recent proposal from the Ministry of Public Health, which would have given doctors a monthly raise of US\$54. An official from the SMU, which recommended the offer, declared, “the members are rebelling and not respecting their union leaders.”

Barring a last minute settlement, all twenty-one public hospitals will be occupied by workers on August 26. Furthermore, FFSP President Beatriz Faijan demanded the resignation of Health Minister Conrado Bonilla as a condition for a new agreement. She indicated that the government strategy had been to agree to the raise in exchange for not filling open vacancies and increasing the work load on the remaining workers.

In solidarity with the strike, the Confederation of State Employees (COEE) will join the strike for a day, rallying at four of the twenty-one hospitals.

On August 28, the allied labor federations of Uruguay, the Inter-union plenum and the National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT) will carry out the sixth one-day general strike since current president Jorge Batlle took power. The strike will demand wage increases for all workers.

Paraguayan workers shut down hospital

Thirteen hundred workers in Asuncion’s “Clinics Hospital” have launched a strike of indefinite duration. They are demanding decent pay and working conditions as well as salaries paid on time from now on. Clinics Hospital is the main source of medical care for Paraguay’s poor.

On August 20, recently installed President Nicanor Duarte visited the hospital and agreed that the strikers deserve more pay and that the hospital is being starved for funds. However, he also said the government has no money.

Paraguay is a country of six million inhabitants. Currently it is in the midst of an economic depression, with 20 percent

unemployment, 15 percent inflation and 64 percent of its population living below the official poverty level.

During the brutal dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) the Clinic Hospital was a focus of resistance against the regime’s violations of human rights.

Sao Paulo health workers strike

On August 22, doctors, nurses and other public health workers walked off the job in Sao Paulo. The workers met in assemblies and will vote on strike action August 25.

The workers are members of the Union of State Public Health Workers of Sao Paulo (SINSAUDE.) They have been demanding improvements in pay since March. SINSAUDE has 27,000 members.

Presidential commission attacks postal workers

The President’s Commission on the United States Postal Service (USPS) has recommended new measures that will further erode the living standards and working conditions of postal workers. While temporarily shelving demands to privatize the postal service, the Bush administration is pressing for more outsourcing of USPS jobs and an increased pace in the closure of the national network of post offices and mail sorting facilities.

The report also calls for “compulsory mediation,” which will end the tripartite arbitration of union, postal management and the system of so-called “neutral” arbitrators, and implement “last best offer arbitration” before government-appointed arbitrators.

Postal policy is also to be taken out of the hands of Congress and placed under a more powerful Postal Regulatory Board appointed by the president. This board will not only set prices but would place a cap on postal employee wages and benefits that would be tied to a model based on the compensation of “comparable private sector workers,” that is, low-wage contract labor.

Rights activists protest firing of immigrant workers in Mississippi

Immigrant rights activists in Mississippi are protesting the decision by chicken processor Peco Foods to fire 200 immigrant workers based on a letter from the Social Security Administration that says their social security numbers did not match up with the agency’s records. The Madison County Sheriff’s Department is said to be preparing to

deport those workers who are illegal immigrants.

Activists point out the “no-match” letter reads, “You should not use this letter to take any adverse action against an employee...Doing so could, in fact, violate state or federal law and subject you to legal consequence.” They also point out that such action could violate terms of the union contract at Peco. Local 1991 of the United Food and Commercial Workers union told the media by phone that they did not want to comment on the case.

Pablo Rosas, one of the victimized workers, told the *Clarion-Ledger* that he paid five dollars a week to the union, but when he contacted them for help after the firing, “They just laughed at us. They made fun of us.” The Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance stated that companies have used no-match letters to get rid of higher-paid workers to make way for new workers at lower wages.

Strikebound Kentucky phone provider facing labor violation charges

The Kentucky Public Service Commission (PSC) rejected a request last week from telecommunications company Alltel to dismiss a complaint by its workers charging the company has violated labor agreements. The ruling comes two months into a strike by 500 members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and one-and-a-half years after the PSC approved Alltel’s acquisition of part of Verizon South’s operations, making it the largest phone provider in Lexington.

Under the acquisition, Alltel agreed to meet several conditions, including that of honoring collective bargaining agreements. The CWA and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers charge the company has violated seven provisions in those agreements.

In addition, the PSC is investigating an escalating number of customer complaints concerning the company. In seven of its first ten months of operation, Alltel ranked number one in customer complaints among Kentucky phone providers. That trend has sharpened since the CWA went on strike. Among the complaints is one from Lexington Mayor Teresa Isaac informing the company that more than 120 intersections had failing traffic signal circuits and that Alltel has persisted in billing the city for traffic camera lines that it was to have disconnected several months back.

Union charges Verizon executives with eavesdropping

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) filed suit August 19 in a New Jersey federal district court charging Verizon senior vice president for investor relations Thomas Bartlett and executive director of investor relations Dominic Di Bucci with violating wiretap law violations by eavesdropping on a union conference call with reporters.

The CWA invited 27 journalists to hear about the union’s negotiations with Verizon and plans for support by the AFL-

CIO. AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka and CWA executive vice president Larry Cohen chaired the call.

Bartlett and Di Bucci obtained access to the toll-free call but failed to announce their presence and later reported the content of the discussion to other company officials. The CWA lawsuit seeks a declaration that Verizon officials violated Title III of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act and that they be enjoined from further similar conduct and that the union be awarded punitive damages.

Meanwhile the CWA and IBEW bureaucracies have scrapped any plans for a strike by Verizon’s 80,000 workers in the northeastern US, whose contract expired August 2. (See: “Verizon negotiations continue as unions reject strike”).

Rally in support of striking Women’s Shelter workers

On August 21 a sizeable crowd rallied in support of 11 striking workers at an Amherst women’s shelter. The workers, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are demanding a 9.3 percent wage increase. The workers have been on strike since August 11.

Rally participants marched to the constituency office of conservative MLA Ernie Fage. The present strike began when management cancelled the existing contract and refused to negotiate a new agreement. Management justified this refusal to negotiate by pointing to budget cuts handed down by the provincial Conservative government.

Strike continues at Inco

The strike by production and maintenance workers at the Sudbury and Port Colborne facilities of nickel producer Inco has entered its twelfth week. The 3,470 workers, represented by the United Steelworkers of America, have been on strike since June 1. Health-care benefits—which Inco is seeking to reduce—appears to be the main obstacle to an agreement. Although the union leadership is participating in “exploratory” talks with management, no further formal negotiations are scheduled at this point.



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