

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 July 2004

## Latin America

### Dominican doctors strike

Public Health workers in the Dominican Republic went on strike July 1 demanding a 100 percent wage increase, back pay and increased funding for the public health system. The strike ended July 9.

Doctors, nurses and technicians that work for the Dominican Social Security Institute returned to work once authorities agreed to pay their back salaries and resolve the shortage of consumable medical supplies, such as bandages and sutures. The strike involved medical personnel at 23 of the 173 public hospitals. Workers at the other hospitals had threatened to join the walkout this week.

Doctors at the Social Security institute currently earn \$US350 a month.

Waldo Ariel, president of the Dominican Medical College, called the settlement inadequate and warned Dominican President Hipolito Mejia that the public health system is in a state of collapse.

Mejia had pleaded with the medical union that it wait for the passage of legislation granting a 30 percent wage increase to all public employees, but the Social Security workers insisted that the draft legislation did not go far enough.

### Mass protests in Argentina over jobs

Argentine President Nestor Kirchner was forced to cancel Independence Day celebrations in the Northwestern city of Tucuman on July 9. Kirchner attended services in that city's main cathedral while groups of unemployed clashed with police nearby. When the president tried to speak to the crowd from a balcony of the church he was booed by demonstrators. Public festivities were cancelled as a result of the protests. Tucuman, the historic city in which independence was declared on July 9, 1816, sits in the center of one of Argentina's poorest regions.

Though the Argentine economy is expected to grow this year at a rate of 7 percent, the highest in Latin

America, the working class is being left behind, according to a document released by the Argentine Workers' Central—one of that nation's three trade union federations.

The report indicates that there is virtually no change in the rate of unemployment. It also points out that there has been an increase in the number of unemployed and underemployed. The unemployment rate is 20 percent; 30 percent of the employed are dissatisfied with substandard jobs. This does not include the substantial layer of disenchanted workers that have given up looking for work.

The rate of unemployment is not evenly distributed. Unemployment in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region is about 17 percent, while the northeast region has an unemployment rate of nearly 40 percent. The one source of jobs that has shown substantial increase is the underground economy, where workers find jobs for as little as 145 pesos (\$US50) a month.

## United States

### Pennsylvania nursing home workers fired after one-day strike

Management at the LaurelWood Care Center in Johnston, Pennsylvania, fired 20 nursing home workers after a one-day strike by Local 1199p of the Service Employees International Union to protest insufficient staffing levels. The strike failed to bring out a majority of the facility's 110 union workers and Grane Healthcare, which runs the nursing home, permanently replaced a section of the strikers.

Local 1199p charges that Grane Healthcare is operating the facility at a staffing level 24 percent below the state average. The company also pads its staffing chart statistics with the names of people who are on leave or no longer work at LaurelWood.

### Strike by Pennsylvania nurses

Nurses at the Mount Nittany Medical Center in State College, Pennsylvania, launched a five-day walkout starting July 9 to protest the failure of hospital

management to respond to the demands of the nurses' bargaining unit. In response to the strike by the hospital's 450 nurses, management has hired replacements, and according to the union is paying them \$80 an hour.

## **Canada**

### **Strike at Quebec Alcoa Smelter**

About 800 workers at the Alcoa smelter in Becancour, Quebec, walked out on July 7 after voting 88 percent against the company's offer earlier the same day. The main issues in the dispute are job security, contracting out and pensions. The previous agreement between the company and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), which represents the workers, expired at the end of June. Alcoa Inc. is the world's largest producer of primary aluminum and operates three aluminum plants in Quebec employing more than 5,000 workers.

On July 9, Alcoa announced it was going to close one of three potlines at the Becancour smelter because of the strike, reducing production by about 11,000 tons a month.

### **Strike begins at Wabush mines**

Five hundred seventy miners in Wabush, which is located in western Labrador in the east coast province of Newfoundland and Labrador, went on strike beginning July 5. According to the United Steelworkers of America, the union representing the workers, the employer is demanding too many concessions, including job "flexibility" and contracting out. The union members voted overwhelmingly for the strike, with 326 votes in favor and only 2 against.

The strike was followed by another one in Wabush's pelletizing and shipping facilities in Pointe Noire, Quebec.



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