

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 January 2006

Latin America

Nicaraguan doctors strike

Public health doctors in Nicaragua, completing their second month on strike, are threatening to close emergency rooms to press their demand for a 70 percent raise.

The 3,000 strikers employed by government-run clinics went on strike November 14. All scheduled medical procedures were postponed, but the doctors continue to attend to emergency cases.

If the clinics were to stop treating emergencies, patients would be forced to go to government hospitals, already in financial trouble because of budget cuts carried out at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund.

The union that represents the striking doctors, the Medical Federation (FM), indicated that the health ministry has broken off negotiations, claiming there is no money for raises. The FM is seeking direct negotiations with the IMF.

In December, public health employees, including nurses and orderlies, called off their struggle for a 15 percent wage increase. They are now threatening to resume striking.

Public health workers strike in El Salvador

Salvadorian public health workers walked off their jobs on January 10 demanding that the government implement a promised raise.

The Association of Public Health Ministry Employees (ANTMSPAS) launched the strike against public hospitals, exempting emergency services. Public health doctors are supporting the strike by the 20,000 employees from 15 hospitals.

On December 21, the Legislative Assembly approved a 5 percent raise for public health workers, half of the 10 percent originally promised. Salvadorian President Elias Antonio Saca claimed workers were being offered less because of lack of money.

Contract workers continue strike at Chilean copper company

The walkout by 28,000 contract workers at Chile's state-owned copper company Codelco is entering its third week with President Ricardo Lagos announcing last Friday the creation of a commission to settle the strike.

The strikers, who work for contractors providing everything from food service to transport, are demanding

bonuses totaling US\$970. Codelco made \$5.3 billion in profits in 2005, benefiting from copper prices that have hit record levels.

Contract workers earn less than half of what the company's 15,000 full-time, unionized workers earn. The union workers are continuing to work. On the first day of the strike on January 4 police used tear gas to disperse strikers from the road leading to the El Teniente mine, the world's largest underground copper mine.

Last week the strikers' leaders dropped their original demand for a productivity bonus worth 2.5 months pay.

The presidential commission will be comprised of executives of CODELCO, union officials and government representatives. When he set up the commission Lagos reiterated his opposition to a bonus for the strikers.

Chilean supermarket workers walk out over working conditions

Seven hundred employees of the Lider chain of supermarkets in the Chilean cities of Via del Mar and El Belloto walked off their jobs on January 9 after negotiations between management and the union broke down. Union spokespersons said the strike is over working conditions and the harsh treatment of employees. The workers have been without a contract since October.

Argentine lifeguards threaten to strike

Argentine lifeguards are threatening to strike over the sacking of 17 colleagues in the beach resort of Mar Chiquita. Union representatives for the lifeguards insist that the Mar Chiquita area requires 120 lifeguards to comply with the legally required maximum of 80 meters of beach per lifeguard. Currently there are only 39 lifeguards for the resort.

The conflict began in December over working conditions in the cities near Mar del Plata, a popular resort area south of Buenos Aires. Union leaders said that unless municipal authorities rehire the sacked workers there will be a walkout by the 1,200 lifeguards that guard beaches along the Atlantic Coast, including 470 lifeguards in Mar del Plata. A strike at the height of the Argentine summer would have serious financial consequences for resort operators, currently benefiting from a record tourist season.

United States

County workers in Oregon strike

Over 200 workers in Josephine County, Oregon, walked out January 9 over cuts in vacation, sick and personal time and the elimination of a deferred compensation plan. Workers were prompted to reject the meager 1.2 percent wage increase included in the concessions package offered by county commissioners when high raises were handed out to division directors.

On the second day of the strike, members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees set up picket lines outside Jackson County Courthouse amidst rumors that county officials were going to supply managers as strike breakers to Josephine County.

The *Oregon News* ran a provocative editorial entitled, "Oregon Public Employees Who Strike Should Be Replaced."

Pennsylvania Democrat proposes bill to ban teachers' strikes

A Pennsylvania Senate committee held a hearing January 9 on legislation being proposed by Democratic minority leader Robert Mellow to ban teachers' strikes. The legislation calls for "last best offer binding arbitration." Those supporting the legislation spoke from the standpoint of shielding communities and students from the so-called adverse effects of strikes.

The legislation would set up a three-member panel that would choose from final offers. No date has been set for the Senate's Labor and Industry Committee to vote on the bill.

More workers die from respiratory diseases related to 9/11 debris

The Associated Press has reported the deaths of three people in the last seven months from causes allegedly related to the inhalation of air saturated with debris from the 9/11 collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York.

Tim Keller, 41, an emergency medical technician (EMT) from Queens Hospital, died June 23 of heart disease complicated by bronchitis and emphysema. Felix Hernandez, 31, an EMT from the Bronx, spent several days after 9/11 working at the site. By 2004 he was too weak to climb stairs and died on October 23 of respiratory diseases, possibly including cystic fibrosis. James Zadroga, a 34-year-old police detective, put in 470 hours at the World Trade Center site during 2001. He died January 5, according to family and friends of black lung and high levels of mercury in the brain. Attorney David Worby, who represents 5,000 people suing those who supervised the 9/11 cleanup, reports that 21 of his clients have died as a result of diseases contracted from exposure to debris from the collapse.

Many fear that asbestos contamination from the collapse will plague New Yorkers for years and charge the Bush administration with covering up the dangers. As Wall Street

strained to reopen the stock market and other businesses in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) head Christine Whitman declared, "I'm glad to reassure the people of New York and Washington, DC, that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink." John Henshaw of the Occupational Safety and Health Agency was quoted in an EPA press release: "Our tests show that it is safe for New Yorkers to go back to work in New York's financial district."

United Food and Commercial Workers official goes to prison

Joseph DiFlumera, a former union official from the United Food and Commercial Workers, reports to prison this week after having admitted to extorting \$1.5 million from a Massachusetts-based grocery chain. Between 1989 and 2003, DiFlumera collected money in exchange for a promise not to unionize the Victory Supermarkets chain.

In a plea bargain, DiFlumera made the extortion admission and pled guilty to mail and wire fraud. The 71-year-old DiFlumera will serve less than four years for the crime at the Federal Medical Center in Devens.

Canada

Newfoundland child care workers strike

Twenty-five employees of Daybreak Parent Child Centre in St John's, Newfoundland, walked out on January 10 demanding a wage increase. They have been without a contract since 2003. Since the province lifted a public employees' wage freeze in the early 1990s, the Daybreak child care workers have steadily fallen behind with salaries now nearly 7 percent lower than those of provincial government employees doing comparable work.

The workers, who are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3017, provide care for pre-school children and disadvantaged families.



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