

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Mexico: Strike by office machine employees

Four hundred workers employed by the Olympia Transnational Company went on strike Friday, January 23, in La Paz, Mexico state. The strike began when management denied the workers a government mandated minimum wage increase of 4.6 percent. Gerardo Xicotencatl Lima, who leads the industrial union that represents these workers, declared that this violated Mexican law.

## Chile: Copper miners protest layoffs

The unions that represent copper miners at the La Escondida mine, one of the largest copper mines in the world, announced that they would go on strike if management carried out the sacking of 2,000 workers. BHP Billiton, the transnational company that owns La Escondida, announced the layoffs in Sydney, Australia on January 21.

The sackings are part of a worldwide reduction in force of 6,000 workers as a result of the global financial crisis. Management sources indicated that most of the layoffs had already taken place and that for the most part they involved part-time, contract workers.

Pedro Marin, president of the Chilean Miners Federation, declared, "If necessary, we will carry out a national strike." Marin claims that the company is using the crisis as a pretext to protect its profits. "This so-called

crisis in mining does not exist. It's possible that profits have dropped, but there is no crisis. They are taking advantage of an opportunity."

Marin announced the formation of an extraordinary union summit to discuss the situation. Among the organizations that would participate in the summit, in addition to the Miners' Federation, is the Confederation of copper workers and the Union of Copper Workers of the North (CODELCO). According to Marin, transnational mine companies that operate in Chile have already fired 720 workers, and the news of the BHP Billiton sackings has created an atmosphere of fear.

## Peru: Medical federation demands higher budget to deal with public health crisis

On January 24, the Peruvian Doctors' Union demanded that the government increase the public health budget to overcome a crisis in the hospitals and to provide health services to 9 million Peruvians currently excluded from all health services. To press for its demands, the union threatened strike action. Julio Vargas, president of the Peruvian Medical Federation, indicated that the current public health budget of US\$800 million represents less than 1.7 percent of GDP, one of the lowest percentages in Latin America.

The doctors union is asking that the budget be doubled. According to Vargas, "Such an amount is totally insufficient to develop health services." He said that the 200 existing public hospitals in Peru need to be rebuilt and provided with modern medical equipment. He also said conditions in the 7,000 public health clinics are deplorable and criticized President Alan Garcia's policy of building new hospitals instead of improving the existing ones.

Vargas declared that the Arzobispo Loayza and the Dos

de Mayo hospitals, both of which are located in Lima, are in critical need of infrastructure repair and new equipment. As bad as conditions in these hospitals are, provincial hospitals are worse. The medical federation plans to mobilize its membership this Tuesday to vote on job actions to force the government to address these demands. This includes the call for a lengthy strike. Last August, doctors returned to work after striking for 38 days.

### **New Jersey nurses strike against pay and benefit cuts**

About 100 registered and licensed practical nurses at the Deptford and Hammonton facilities of Innova Health and Rehabilitation went on strike Friday against attempts to lower their pay by 33 percent and eliminate or make health care and pension benefits unaffordable. The striking nurses drew support from family members of patients at the facility and others as they passed by pickets.

Innova has refused to bring in state or federal mediators or to meet with an arbitrator. The National Union of Health Care Employees, which represents striking nurses, alleges unfair labor practices and has suggested that Innova is proposing new work conditions that do not make patient care its top priority.

The striking nurses were willing to continue at the same rates of pay, but according to nurse Michelle Hays, management "laughed in our faces. We're nothing but dollar signs to them." Nurse Karlie Pollitt added, "We're just asking to keep what we have. We have kids and mortgages too. We hope they realize that and how much time and love we give our patients and do the right thing."

### **Arizona power plant worker killed in industrial accident**

A worker at the Four Corners Power Plant near Fruitland, Arizona was found dead at the end of his early-morning shift January 14. Glen Harrison, 56 years old and an employee at the coal-powered facility for 29 years, was working on environmental control equipment during his shift. While investigations will be required to determine

the cause of the accident, early suspicions point to equipment malfunction.

The facility reported 17 injuries to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 2008. Harrison is the first employee of the Arizona Public Service Company, which runs the plant, to die at the Four Corners Power Plant since it opened on the Navajo reservation in 1963. However, an unknown number of contract workers have died at the facility during the course of its operations.

### **Liberals move to end York University strike**

Despite repeated assurances it would not intervene in the strike at York University, the Ontario Liberal government recalled parliament on Sunday to introduce back-to-work legislation to end what is now the longest strike ever waged at the school.

Although the government sought to end the strike immediately, it is not likely that legislation will be passed until later in the week. Premier Dalton McGuinty said he hoped the legislation would pass unanimously since there was no reasonable prospect of a settlement. In a token gesture, the NDP, which maintained virtual silence throughout the strike, voted against the anti-strike bill pending further debate.

The province had earlier appointed a mediator, but the two sides remained deadlocked over the issue of job security. Part-time and contract faculty numbering 3,340 went on strike November 6, halting all classes at the school which is Canada's third largest. Only 10 percent of classes, which are taught by nonunion faculty, resumed last week.



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