

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Bolivian protesters hold talks with government

After two weeks of protests that paralyzed traffic and business activity in the mining town of Potosi, and which included hunger strikes by 140 residents, protesters met with the government in Sucre on Thursday. The delegates are members of the Potosi Civic Committee (COMCIPO). This is the sixth attempt by the two parties to come to an accord.

The protesters, many of whom are miners in nearby mines owned by Sumitomo of Japan and Coeur d'Alene of the US, claim that they have been ignored by the government of Evo Morales. They are demanding improvements in the poverty-stricken area, including the building of a cement factory, a new road and the reopening of a zinc mine nearby, as well as resolution of issues involving the border with the neighboring Uro region.

The regional governor, Felix Gonzalez, had joined the hunger strikers but had to stop because of health reasons that landed him in the local hospital under intensive care.

According to Efe news service, "Bolivian farmers showed their support for the strike by seizing a power plant that powers the San Cristobal mining company. Most activities have been suspended at the silver, zinc and lead mine, owned by Japanese company Sumitomo. Sumitomo said it hoped for quick resolution to the conflict."

Panama: Protests against anti-labor law continue

Demonstrations calling for the repeal of Law 30—the so-called "sausage law"—were renewed on August 12 across Panama. The laws, pushed through the legislature by President Ricardo Martinelli, contain several anti-worker provisions, and others that are opposed by environmentalists.

Protests against the law erupted in July shortly after its passage and lasted for ten days. Banana workers and the Bocas Fruit Company clashed over the interpretation of the law, precipitating a violent police intervention in which two people were killed and 100 injured.

Students at the University of Panama demonstrated and workers, chanting anti-government slogans and carrying banners, blocked traffic for short periods on Avenida Balboa and the Cinta Costera.

The protests are taking place as Martinelli courts the South Korean government, which has voiced its interest in developing copper mining in Panama. The Panamanian president is poised to present a new law to the Panamanian Congress in the coming weeks that, according to nicated.net, "would allow foreign governments to own up to 49 percent of the shares of Panamanian mining companies. Under the current law, foreign governments cannot invest in Panama's mining industry, only private companies can."

The proposed law—which would allow the waiving of environmental impact studies—has already drawn criticism from environmentalists and indigenous groups.

Puerto Rican school workers protest layoffs

Carrying signs protesting massive layoffs resulting from a law enacted last March, a group of school employees, including janitors and maintenance workers, assembled noon Thursday in front of the Rafael Rivera Otero Elementary School in Las Lomas, San Juan. Law 7, passed at the urging of conservative governor Luis Fortuño, has already sparked widespread protests, including a one-day general strike on October 15.

The web site of the North American Congress on Latin America says of Law 7: “Conceived as the island’s economic recovery plan, the law declared a state of economic emergency, enabling Fortuño to ‘restructure’ public employment in ways that would otherwise be illegal: unilaterally suspending union contracts, overriding labor laws in order to dismiss public service workers, and denying those who remain employed the job protections guaranteed in their union contracts. The immediate consequences of this plan were widely understood to be dire, since the government is Puerto Rico’s largest employer and the island’s unemployment rate in July was already 16.5 percent, according to the Department of Labor.”

At a press conference held at the protest site, Israel Marrero, an official of the Conservation, Technical, Maintenance and Surveillance Employees Chapter of the Puerto Rican Workers Syndicate (PWRS), told the *Puerto Rico Daily Sun*, “As of today there are 142 public schools without maintenance personnel. There are also 151 schools without any kind of administrative personnel.”

Marrero complained that close to 1,000 administrative employees have been laid off. According to the *Sun*, “At the Office for School Improvements [OMEP for its Spanish acronym] there are some 300 workers left out of the almost 800 originally working for the agency.” Marrero said “this will create serious problems with enrollment—like those we saw at the beginning of the school year—with graduations and many other activities.”

However, the PWRS earlier conceded to the layoffs in an agreement signed with the Education Department “under which the agency agrees to rehire laid-off school maintenance employees based on their seniority,” notes the *Sun*.

Duluth nurses face strike vote over patient workloads

Some 900 nurses at St. Mary’s Medical Center in Duluth, Minnesota will vote August 18 whether to ratify a contract offer or authorize a one-day strike. The Minnesota Nurses Association, which represents the registered nurses, is recommending a rejection of the proposal because it does not sufficiently address patient workloads.

At issue in the negotiations is the union’s demand for contract language that will allow nurses to reject the imposition of additional patients on a nurse if they are overwhelmed and feel the additional workload will endanger patient safety. Management has said they will allow a nurse to raise the question of patient workload, but not determine it. St. Mary’s nurses want to implement language similar to that contained in contracts already in existence in Minneapolis and St. Paul, where a charge nurse can close down units when it is believed nurses are overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, another 420 nurses at Duluth’s St. Luke’s hospital are to conclude negotiations at the beginning of this week and will also vote on August 18.

Kansas factory worker crushed to death

A 30-year-old factory worker at Superior Boiler Works in Hutchinson, Kansas died August 12 when a boiler fell on him. Ron Klinkerman was working alone in an area of the plant when the accident happened. A co-worker used a forklift to hoist the heavy metal object off his body.



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