

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Venezuelan medical workers hold 12-hour strike

Doctors, nurses and other medical personnel completed their fourth limited strike action throughout Venezuela June 10. The medical workers, members of the Medical Federation of Venezuela (FMV), claimed 80 percent adherence in the nation's hospital network. In the capital, Caracas, at least 10 hospitals complied with the action.

The strike was called over continuing demands to address the problems of debts owed to the union by the authorities, for a collective contract and a solution to security problems that medical workers contend with daily.

In most areas, consultations and elective surgeries were suspended, but emergency services continued, according to Thomas Alastre, president of the College of Medicine in the northwestern state of Falcón.

A physician's monthly salary is about 2,400 bolívars (US\$560). However, Alastre told *El Universal* on Friday: "It isn't only for salary improvements; they are very just demands devoted to equity. This also involves better conditions for the hospitals, supplies; it is a call to attention to the government that the medical sector should be listened to." If they are not, FMV representatives have called for a "grand march of doctors" on June 16.

Mexican teachers march on capital to demand improvements in schools

More than 5,000 teachers from the Mexican states of Michoacán, Puebla, Guerrero, Morelos, the Federal District and the Valley of México marched from Mexico City's central Zócalo to the Interior Department in Mexico City on June 10. The teachers marched to demand that the government increase resources to educational facilities in poverty-stricken areas and hire more education workers to meet the needs of children in those areas.

A press release put out by the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) denounced the conditions, the "deplorable state, without bathrooms, without windows, with roofs and walls that are on the point of collapse because in 20 years they haven't invested anything."

The majority of the marchers are members of the teachers' union of Michoacán, which had just completed 10 days on strike. Jorge Cázares, secretary general of Michoacán section 18, called for "opening a national dialogue with the government not only to demand salary improvements; we also require hundreds of positions for teachers and education support workers, since there are no administrators, secretaries, social workers,

physical education and technology teachers."

After the teachers presented a petition to the Interior Department, they made the rounds of various media establishments to request impartiality in the coverage of the mobilizations and actions that they have carried out. Juan Zavala, a teacher in CNTE section 18, told *Milenio* that more than 20,000 people from various education sectors would march to Los Pinos, the official presidential residence, to bring their demands to President Felipe Calderón.

Dominican hospital workers on strike

Resident doctors and nurses at the Francisco Moscoso Puello hospital in Santo Domingo went on strike on June 7. The workers are demanding the sacking of the director, Roberto Lafontaine. In addition, there are a number of issues including a salary hike, repair and upkeep of the surgery area, better food for personnel, adequate equipping of the units and distribution of funds from the national health insurance system.

On the day the strike was called, water from rainfall leaked from the roof into the reception area and reached such a level that workers gave up on using mops and employed shovels and buckets to pick up the water. One doctor described the situation as "raining inside when it has cleared up outside."

The strike is not total—emergency services continue—and the situation has been complicated by a cholera outbreak in the area. On Thursday morning, a 50-year-old woman died of cholera, and her family blamed the striking medical workers for her death. The doctors countered that her death was not necessarily from diarrhea caused by cholera.

Lafontaine has denounced the workers as indolent and irresponsible, and claimed that the leadership of the Dominican College of Medicine (CMD) "are indifferent to human suffering; their concern is a plate of food while we have an avalanche of patients with cholera." A CMD spokesman warned against attempts to divert attention from the critical issues that have to be addressed.

The CMD has expressed its willingness to negotiate, but has yet to receive a response from the authorities.

Brazilian auto workers go back to work as strikes break out nationwide

Workers at the Volkswagen auto plant in São Jose dos Pinhas voted June 10 to return to work on June 13, more than a month after walking out over salary demands. The SMC auto workers' union had originally called the strike on May 5, demanding a bonus of 12,000 reais (US\$7,528) to be paid out in two equal installments as well as a wage increase of an unspecified amount.

The workers returned after the union and management agreed to set the

bonus at 11,500 reais (US\$7,280) and raises that the SMC web site claimed would be from 15 to 20 percent.

The SMC noted that the strike was the longest strike in the world at a Volkswagen plant. The São Jose dos Pinhas plant is one of five owned by Volkswagen in Brazil. The other four had continued running during the strike.

The settlement came in the context of a wave of strikes in Brazil last week. A blog (*Adventures of a Gringa*) in Brazil noted that in the space of that one week, strikes broke out among train workers, education and health workers, civil police, university administrators and professors and public school teachers in various locations around the country.

In Rio de Janeiro, firefighters, who are prohibited by law from striking, marched to the main firefighters' headquarters, broke in and occupied it for 12 hours until police attacked with tear gas. More than 400 firefighters were arrested and could face up to 10 years in prison. Protests have continued over the arrests and the treatment of the firefighters.

Argentina: March and strike in support of teachers and health workers

A sector of the Argentine Workers' Central (CTA) carried out a national strike and protest on

June 8 that filled streets in various provinces. In the capital city of Buenos Aires, some 20,000 protesters marched from the Congress to the Casa Rosada, the headquarters of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, to demand an increase in pensions and the minimum wage and the widening of coverage for subsidies for children.

However, the mobilizations were called mainly to express support for teachers in Santa Cruz and health workers in San Miguel de Tucumán. On strike for over 40 and 100 days, respectively, both the teachers and the health workers have faced government intransigence and repression.

The mobilizations highlighted divisions within and among sectors of the official labor movement. Although they professed support for their Santa Cruz colleagues, one group of teachers, "List of Teachers and Professors of Academy Collective," criticized the CTA decision to hold the actions, since they were decided in a congress of delegates without input and debate from the rank and file.

The CTA itself is divided as well. One wing, headed by Hugo Yasky, supports the Peronist Fernández administration, while another under the leadership of Pablo Micheli is in opposition. Moreover, the "opposition" wing of the CTA is highly critical of the Peronist CGT (General Labor Confederation) headed by truckers' union chief Hugo Moyano.

Heavy equipment operators strike building sites in northwest Indiana

The union representing heavy equipment operators walked off the job June 9 at selected building sites across northwest Indiana after they failed to reach an agreement with the Northwest Indiana Contractors Association over health benefits. The International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150, which represents the striking workers, wanted the employers' group to assist the union in meeting health care costs, which are increasing at 10 to 14 percent a year simply to maintain the current level of coverage.

Currently, the union is only picketing crane rental locations and not building sites where workers from other trades would likely refuse to cross picket lines. The strike could widen if the Operating Engineers

extend their strike beyond building projects to highway construction projects after workers rejected contract proposals from this employers' group.

A group of 20 contractors broke with the main employers' group and signed a separate agreement with Local 150. Calling themselves the Northern Indiana Independent contractors group, they indicated they disagreed with "hard-line tactics" of the main employer group'

Kansas City pipefitters end strike over benefits

Pipefitters ended their weeklong strike against the Mechanical Contractors Association of Kansas City after the union agreed to the employers' demand for a restructuring of health benefits aimed at a lower tier for new apprentices. The contractors also got Pipefitters Local 533 to agree to contractual language to maintain a base level of funding for pension benefits. The contractors claimed they feared unfunded liabilities relating to pension benefits.

Air Canada workers poised to strike

After 10 weeks of fruitless negotiations, the union representing 3,800 customer service and sales staff at Air Canada delivered a 72-hour strike notice late last week, but union negotiators insisted they were willing to work through the weekend to avoid a strike.

A key issue in negotiations between Air Canada and the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) is the airlines' proposal to change the pension plan for new hires to a defined contribution as opposed to a defined benefit plan. In addition, the company is seeking to cut benefits to existing employees by as much as 40 percent and to increase the number of workers deemed part-time.

Air Canada, which returned to profitability last year, has assured passengers that it will continue with its regular schedule and welcomed all new bookings in the event of a strike.



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