Workers Struggles: The Americas

20 December 2011

Argentinean health workers strike

Health workers at four hospitals in Córdoba, capital of the central Argentine province of the same name, stopped work on December 14 after voting in an assembly the day before. The workers are members of the UTS health workers union, which has carried out a number of limited strikes and marches throughout the year over government refusal to address salary and other issues. Workers at health centers and clinics throughout the province carried out protest actions as well.

The administration of Peronist governor José Manuel de la Sota responded to the strike action with a call for a meeting between the union and government negotiators. UTS president Dr. Carlos Altamirano denounced the tactic, telling *Cadena 3*, "It is on the [government] web site but it doesn't say the hour or the location. They call us to a meeting but nobody is informed. The government's attitude of calling a meeting after we decided on our action is not serious."

Nonetheless, Altamirano expressed willingness to meet: "We'll go, if they tell us where and at what time."

When a union delegation went to the Civic Center the next day they were met by three government representatives who conditioned negotiations on calling off the strike. On December 17 the UTS agreed to suspend the action until Thursday, December 22.

A UTS spokesperson told reporters, "We just resolved for the last time to give the go-ahead to the government, lift the strike and trust that in the Thursday meeting they are going to make a salary offer." She explained that, lacking a concrete offer, a plenary would be held on the afternoon of the 22nd to launch a strike the following day.

Peruvian bank employees hold 24-hour stoppage

Members of the Sinatban bank employees union stopped work December 13 at Bank of the Nation offices in Lima and other locales in Peru over demands that have gone unheeded since January. Over 500 agencies of the government-owned institution nationwide were affected by the strike.

The main issue is a promised wage hike that, according to a Sinatban attorney, was changed for the worse. The attorney, Fausto Bazán, "declared that last year the entity offered them a raise of 200 soles [US$70]; however, this year they changed the raise to 110 soles [US$40]. But the workers expect a raise of at least 200 soles," according to a *La República* report.

Honduran protest against killings of journalists met with police violence

A group of about 40 journalists and supporters marched through the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa December 13 to protest the murders of at least 24 news professionals since 2003 and especially in the period since the coup that ousted elected president Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

When they reached the presidential residence the protesters were attacked by police and soldiers, who used batons and tear gas to keep them from getting around a security barrier. The demonstrators then lay down at the parking lot entrance.

A statement by the protesters called for justice for the murdered reporters—17 of whom died since January 2010—and an end to the increasing "criminal pattern that endangers life and the practice of journalism" that has characterized the regime of president Porfiro Lobos.

A government spokesman claimed no knowledge of the attack on the demonstrators and said, "We will investigate who gave the order to repress the journalists."

Costa Ricans protest regressive tax proposal

Over 2,000 Costa Rican workers, students, housewives and members of social organizations marched in pouring rain December 13 through downtown San José to protest a proposed tax package currently before the Legislative Assembly. Upon arrival at the legislative building a group of protesters presented lawmakers with a letter asking them to reject the tax bill—part of the 2012 Fiscal Plan—promoted by the ruling National Liberation Party and the official opposition Citizens Action Party.

The 2012 fiscal plan proposes a number of regressive measures, most notably the replacement of the 13 percent sales tax on goods with a 14 percent value-added tax on goods and services. "The bill also proposes new taxes such as global income tax on free trade zones beginning in 2015, a charge of 2% on private education and health, as well as changes to income tax," according to an *Inside Costa Rica* report.

Several educators unions—the Secondary Education Professors Association, the Education Workers Syndicate, the National Association of Educators and others—led the call for the protest. While denouncing the tax for its impact on lower-income workers and their families, the unions have limited their demands to plugging loopholes and combating "inefficiency" in tax collections.

As the economic crisis has deepened in 2011, Costa Rican workers have responded with a number of actions. The last few months alone have seen strikes in the health, medical and education sectors, by banana workers and National Press employees as well as street protests by motorcycle owners over hikes in insurance fees.

Betrayals cause Trinidadian port workers to call removal of union president

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A series of events in recent weeks around contract negotiations between the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union (SWWTU) and Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (PATT) has led many port workers to call for the resignation of SWWTU president Michael Annisette and his negotiating team.

The SWWTU and the PATT had been at a standstill for months over the government's refusal to budge on its offer of a puny 5 percent wage raise—divided 2-1-2—over the length of the three years in which the workers have worked since the expiration of the contract more than 40 months ago. Dockworkers at Port of Spain went out December 9, and stayed out three days until Annisette convinced them to go back, at the same time telling reporters that the 5 percent "would not cut it with the union."

The workers, kept in the dark about the progress of negotiations, shut down the port again on December 15. In a December 16 report in the *Trinidad Express*, they said their dissatisfaction was not only about wages, but also about working conditions and the poor representation of the union tops. One worker pointed to rotting and crumbling tables in the canteen. In addition he said, "Over 1,000 men share two toilets and a bathroom. We have rats running through here and the union is not addressing these issues."

They also complained that they were not informed of the union's counterproposal Thursday, which left the 2-1-2 formula untouched, but with a slight change in the workers' COLA. The PATT accepted the proposal and the workers were told to return to work. Annisette claimed that the cave-in was actually a victory that he had cleverly put over on management.

A worker cited in *Trinidad Express Newspapers* expressed a different view, "This did not happen overnight, we begged for changes for months and Annisette was busy holding (Prime Minister Patrick) Manning's skirt in Parliament when he should have been here with the workers."

Annisette's capitulation is reminiscent of the flip-flop by Public Services Association (PSA) president Watson Duke, who last spring engaged in grandstanding and denunciations of the government's 5 percent demand, only to meekly agree to it in April.

Since then, a number of unions have accepted the 5 percent: Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) workers, Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority (TTCAA), the West Indian Group of University Teachers (WIGUT), the Prison Officers Association and the senior division of the Fire Services Association among them.

Office cleaners rally in New Jersey, authorize strike against concessions

Thousands of office cleaners voted to authorize a strike December 15 against a group of cleaning contractors unless management and the union reach an equitable contract by the end of the year. Some 7,000 workers represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ rallied in Newark, New Jersey and then carried out a march to demonstrate their opposition to concessions.

The New Jersey Contractors Association, which represents ABM, ALLAN Industries, Bravo Building Services, CRS Facility Services and ISS Facility Services, are seeking to cut starting pay from $12 an hour to $9, increase the portion of health care costs paid by workers, and implement a 15-month wage freeze.

The SEIU represents some 60,000 office cleaners in several states of the Northeast and many of them have contracts that expire December 31. Workers in New York authorized strike action back on December 1 and other votes were slated last week for Hartford, Stamford, New Haven, and Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Minnesota workers reject contract revision, continue strike

Workers at Polar Tank Trailer in Opole, Minnesota voted down a minor contract alteration December 12 and will continue their strike against the company's demand for workers to accept increased health care costs, the outsourcing of jobs, a wage freeze in year one, and a cap on vacations at four weeks. The 360 members of the International Association of Machinists Local 165 launched their strike on December 1 after workers voted down the contract proposal 246-41 and then voted by 261-25 to strike.

A company spokesman for Polar Tank Trailer declared, "We intend to keep our commitments to our clients" as the company has shifted office personnel over to production and has begun bringing in replacement workers. Workers made concessions in 2008. Since then, Polar has used that leverage to establish itself as the number one builder of tank trailers in the United States.

Lockout at Georgia credit union

Employees at the Marietta, Georgia-based LGE Community Credit Union have been locked out since December 2 after workers refused to accept radical alterations in their contract. LGE, formerly known as Lockheed Georgia Employees Credit Union, is demanding the replacement of workers' pension plan by the inferior 401(k), the substitution of merit pay increases for across-the-board pay hikes and new language that would allow the credit union to arbitrarily transfer workers between any of its seven branches spread across three counties.

LGE has hired temporary replacement workers during the lockout. Negotiations continue between LGE and the International Association of Machinists Local 9.

Newfoundland elevator workers strike

Nineteen workers employed by Otis and ThyssenKrupp companies, installing elevators and escalators in St. John's and Corner Brook, Newfoundland went on strike last week after company negotiators walked away from negotiations.

Their last union contract under the International Union of Elevator Constructors expired in July and union negotiators say there has been no progress in contract talks since that time. The companies are seeking major concessions in wages and other areas according to the union.

Toronto area transit strikers hold protest march

Over 100 workers protesting stalled talks in the eight week old strike at York Regional transit, north of Toronto, last week held a march up Yonge St., shutting down traffic on the main artery of the country's largest city.

Almost 600 workers at three companies have been off the job since

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October 24 across the area north of Toronto, affecting bus service throughout the region. The union has been demanding arbitration. The regional council has reportedly saved over $5 million in the dispute, which revolves around issues such as wages, pensions and benefits.

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