Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Paraguayan public hospital doctors on strike over salaries, harassment, firings

Public hospital doctors in Paraguay, members of the FNTS health workers federation, stopped work on December 28 in protest over the government's refusal to address a number of their demands. Along with improvements in their salaries, the doctors are demanding an end to persecutions of union members and the rehiring of two doctors who were recently fired. Lastly, they demand that mass layoffs planned for January not be carried out.

On December 29, the doctors held a demonstration against the presence of riot police in the capital's Asunción Medical Emergency Center—brought in after some incidents the day before—and denounced their being treated like criminals. Public health secretary Esperanza Martínez called the strike "infantile" and "unethical." She added that the rehiring of the doctors was "nonnegotiable," and threatened sanctions if the strike continues.

The doctors claimed 100 percent adherence to the strike. Emergency services and admissions were not disrupted.

Tripartite talks were begun December 30. FNTS spokesman César Pimienta told *La Crónica* that the strike was planned to last until January 6, but if talks produced no results it would continue indefinitely, with some doctors initiating a hunger strike.

Uruguayan supermarket workers strike over nonpayment of bonuses

Workers for the Uruguayan supermarket chain Devoto began a 24-hour stoppage on December 30. The workers had carried out a similar action in the three Devoto supermarkets in the Montevideo area on December 24.

The cause for the strikes was the nonpayment by the supermarkets of the *presentismo* bonus in the contract signed six months ago between the Casino group, owner of the Devoto, Disco and Geant supermarket chains, and the Uruguayan Federation of Commercial and Service Employees, Fuecys.

According to the agreement, workers with perfect attendance are to receive a monthly bonus of 800 pesos (US$40.40). The average monthly wage for workers under the contract is 9,600 pesos (US$485).

However, according to Fuecys spokespeople, management deducted the payment from workers who had taken days off for medical appointments—legally free days—claiming that the workers should have scheduled the appointments on their regular days off. Tripartite meetings at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MTSS) failed to resolve the issue.

By the afternoon, after another meeting at the MTSS, Fuecys called the strike off, saying that an agreement had been reached. Planned actions for the days ahead at the Disco and Geant stores were also canceled. Negotiations over other outstanding issues will await a tripartite meeting in March.

Mexican rail workers walk out to protest nonpayment and conditions

A group of railroad workers in the Mexican state of

Baja California went on strike on December 30 over the noncompliance of the firm Ferrocarriles CZRY with the terms of its labor contract.

CZRY runs cargo between Tijuana and Tecate,about 30 miles east,and employs 19 workers for the route, which includes the Tecate brewery and energy provider Star Gas. Since 2009, CZRY has been the contract operator for ADMICARGA, a parastatal entity of the Baja California state government. The contract between ADMICARGA and CZRY’s parent company Carrizo Gorge Railway was set to expire December 31.

It was recently discovered that the firm has not been paying into the Infonavit federal institute for worker’s housing and the Social Security fund. In addition, the company and ADMICARGA have ignored complaints of salary irregularities and delays in payroll.

Other workers’ complaints include the lack of hygienic, secure working conditions and of proper equipment. Lastly, as STRFM Section 35 Secretary Carlos Romero López told *El Mexicano*: “We discovered this week that ADMICARGA is planning…to take control of Ferrocarriles with the desire to get rid of our people and our union… López added, “It isn’t correct or just to leave people in the street” due to ADMICARGA’s bad management.

The strike call was limited to four days and was set to end on Monday, January 2.

Threat of wider lockout of Connecticut nursing home workers

Some 700 nursing home workers for HealthBridge at five locations in Connecticut could find themselves locked out after January 1 along with about 90 workers at the company’s West River Health Care Center in Milford, who were barred from going back to work on December 13. HealthBridge had set a date of January 1 as a deadline for the New England Healthcare Employees Union, District 1199, to agree to a new contract after ten months of bargaining.

Management is demanding workers pay $7,300 a year for family medical coverage where workers previously paid nothing. HealthBridge is also seeking to terminate the pension plan and take away workers’ half-hour paid lunch break.

Besides Milford, HealthBridge has facilities in Danbury, Stamford, Newington, Westport and Wethersfield, Connecticut where workers are all under the same contract. District 1199 settled a pattern agreement with more than 40 separate nursing home operators. HealthBridge, pointing to an economic climate that has seen 41 nursing centers close in Connecticut since 1995, says it will not abide by the pattern agreement.

Rio Tinto locks out Quebec workers

On New Year’s Day, global giant Rio Tinto Alcan locked out 755 workers in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, Quebec, about 300 miles northeast of Montreal.

The lockout was triggered after workers voted in favor of strike action and then rejected the company’s latest offer. The company then elected to lock workers out when the last contract expired at midnight. One of the main issues in the dispute are the conditions under which work can be contracted out.

The company has said that it plans to continue operations at two thirds capacity using non-unionized staff but will be shutting down part of its smelting operations until further notice.