

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 January 2012

Paraguayan doctors strike

Paraguay's Sinamed (National Syndicate of Health Ministry Doctors) union went on strike January 23 to protest delays in salary payments and to demand other benefits that have been agreed upon with the authorities. A Sinamed spokesman said the strike would last for 15 days "or until the Ministry listens to us."

In addition to the delays in salary, the doctors demand the payment of the *aguinaldo* or year-end bonus, regularization of contracts for 80 percent of the doctors in the Public Health Ministry (MSP)—which, according to Sinamed leader Lilio Irala, "to this day haven't been signed"—and equal pay for equal work.

The last demand has to do with the fact that "there are doctors who get paid for 12 hours what others get for 24 hours on duty," as reported in *La Nación*.

Some 600 doctors are members of Sinamed, mostly in the Central department near Asunción and other areas in the nation's interior. Although surgeries were delayed, emergency and intensive care services were not disrupted.

Since Sinamed is not part of the FNTS health workers federation, FNTS did not join in the strike, though it claimed that it shared Sinamed's complaints. As of January 28, the strike still held, though some doctors had returned to work.

Peruvian prison employees strike for 24 hours

Workers for Peru's National Penitentiary Institute (INPE) of Cusco and other locations struck for 24 hours on January 25 to demand better salaries and the contracting of more personnel. Other demands included a change of certain officials and alleviation of overcrowding.

An INPE official told *El Comercio* that prison employees are public servants who work for low pay in a dangerous environment. They are demanding an increase of 1,500 soles (US\$558) for administrative and security personnel.

In Cusco, strikers picketed at the front of the Q'encoro facility in the early morning hours. In Chimbote the attempt by more than 150 workers to blockade the city's main street was prevented by persistent heavy rainfall. Protesting workers burned tires and bushes in front of the prison at Puerto Pizarro. The workers have vowed to radicalize their protests if they get no results.

The strike actions only covered administrative work, however. A

group of workers provided security and basic services during the stoppage.

Honduran nurses strike over privatized nursing schools

Auxiliary nurses in 17 departments throughout Honduras stopped work on January 26. The strike, called by the ANEAH national nurses union, is a protest against the hiring of nurses who have graduated from private nursing schools, which have proliferated since the installation of the current administration of Porfirio Lobos.

Ana Mebis Velásquez, president of the ANEAH local at the Mario Catarino Rivas Hospital, told *La Tribuna*, "Now any person that pays can open a nursing school, which is wrong, since by not educating those women the life of the patient is put at risk." She denounced the mushrooming of unregulated clandestine schools in San Pedro Sula, which "show up like ants and don't fulfill the requirements of the law."

On January 27, acting on the request of the hospital administration, 15 soldiers of the 105th Infantry Brigade came to Catarino Rivas to serve as scab labor.

On January 28, ANEAH told its members to return to work after signing an agreement with the Health Secretariat regarding the evaluation of 32 nursing schools. Health Minister Arturo Bendaña told the press that the agency would form a commission "that permits the review of the academic syllabi of these schools to see if they comply with the necessary requisites" to prepare students for the nursing profession.

Factional fracas in Mexican teachers union

A factional confrontation in Michoacán, Mexico on January 26 between members of the teachers union confederation SNTE left five teachers injured, a number of reporters threatened and two vehicles damaged.

The site of the conflict was the city of Morelia's Palacio del Arte, where members of the "dissident" CNTE faction impeded the proceedings of a congress called to name new officers to the Section 18 executive board. CNTE members accuse the Section 18 director, Sarbelio Molina Vélez, of being "arbitrary and contaminated by professor Gordillo."

The reference is to SNTE head Elba Esther Gordillo, whose alignment with the right-wing PAN party, corruption and support for the ACE education privatization scheme have brought calls for her removal. (See “Mexican teachers fight to defend public education”)

The day of the congress, CNTE members, some hooded and armed with sticks and stones, prevented delegates from entry, scuffling with some, in one case chasing down a professor and cutting his hair. Protesters chanted slogans against the congress and demanded the participation of CNTE candidates in a democratic election.

The next day, several hundred teachers marched and held a protest meeting in front of the Government Palace.

In a tacit admission of the antidemocratic nature of the congress, Molina Vélez admitted that proper notice had not been given about it, and that out of 50,000 members, only 27,000 had been notified. He announced that the congress was postponed until “further notice.”

Iowa company issues unionbusting ultimatum

Management at the Nichols Aluminum plant in Davenport, Iowa sent out a letter January 24 to the 254 striking members of Teamsters Local 371 outlining their demand to push increased medical costs onto the backs of workers and implement a lower-tier wage bracket for new hires. Workers counter that the new health care plan would be unaffordable.

Nichols also ran an ad in a local paper seeking replacement workers. “We will exercise our right to operate our business and meet our customers’ needs as long as necessary,” the letter informed strikers’ families.

Nichols Aluminum workers went on strike January 20. Negotiations between the two sides are scheduled to resume February 4.

Anti-labor measures advanced in South Carolina

South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley announced an executive order on January 24 that increases the state’s vigilance over already existing laws that bar striking workers from collecting unemployment insurance. The announcement came on the same day that a bill was filed bearing the co-sponsorship of all 76 Republican state representatives that beefs up penalties against unions who are found in breach of the state’s existing right-to-work legislation.

“Unions are not needed, wanted or welcome in South Carolina,” said Haley. Currently, labor unions only account for 5 percent of the South Carolina workforce. Among the measures that the current legislation would impose is that workers would be allowed

to terminate their membership in a union at any time. Labor unions would also be required to submit the same financial information to the state that is currently submitted to the federal government.

The debate between Republicans and Democrats over union rights in South Carolina mirrors the campaigns waged in Wisconsin and Ohio and other states to undermine unions as a financial resource supporting the Democratic Party. Among Democrats, their opposition to such legislation is not rooted in defending workers’ rights and living standards but in their belief that the labor bureaucracy can better aid in the implementation of policies that impose the costs of the ongoing crisis onto the backs of workers.

Halifax transit workers poised to strike

After rejecting the city’s latest offer by over 98 percent, transit workers in the port city of Halifax, Nova Scotia are set to go on strike as early as February 2 if a last minute deal isn’t reached.

The 760 Metro Transit workers affected include bus drivers, ferry operators and maintenance workers with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). Union leaders say the city is seeking to contract out entire departments as well as various services in a new contract. The union says the two sides are much further apart on the issue of contracting out in this round even though it is the same issue which provoked the last strike here in 1998.

Transit workers in Halifax have been working without a contract since August of last year when the city immediately sought conciliation, a process that despite numerous meetings led to a collapse of negotiations.

Toronto area transit strike ends

The three-month-old strike by transit workers in the York region of north Toronto was brought to an end last week when deals were struck with the various companies contracted to provide service, or in one case with the city terminating its contract with the company.

It was alleged by the ATU that the termination notice was timed to intimidate other workers into ending their strike, although union leaders characterized the latest offer as “reasonable and fair”. Details of the various contracts have not yet been released and service is expected to resume over the next week.



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