

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 April 2012

Bolivian doctors and health workers strike, demonstrate against decree

Doctors and medical workers employed at Bolivia's state hospitals and social security facilities began an indefinite strike on March 28. The strike is the latest escalation of actions to protest a recent government decree—Supreme Decree 1126—that revokes a labor law, dating to 1970, that established a six-hour day for doctors in state facilities. The decree returns the workday to eight hours.

The doctors had already carried out limited 24-hour and 48-hour stoppages in March. Minister of Health Juan Carlos Calvimontes, with the full support of President Evo Morales, has remained adamant, declaring the strike illegal and calling for the docking of the doctors' pay for the earlier limited stoppages.

On March 31, striking doctors, health workers and supporters held a massive "white apron" march through downtown La Paz, where a group of medical students burned Calvimontes in effigy. At the end of the march, a meeting of medical union officials ratified the call for repeal of the decree.

The action was replicated in Cochabamba, Potosí and other parts of the country, with calls for the sacking of Calvimontes and for further actions, including hunger strikes, marches and blockades until 1126 is repealed.

As they have done in the previous actions, doctors continued to provide emergency services.

Brazilian bus drivers strike over wage dispute

Bus drivers in the Brazilian state of Rio walked off the job March 30 over continuing disagreement with the Setrerj bus company employers association.

The strike is a result of the failure of the Regional Workers Tribunal to agree to a wage increase. Setrerj's offer of 10 percent with a 25 percent consumer price index rise is countered by the union's call for 16 and 100 percent respectively.

The Brazilian economy's inflation rate has slowed somewhat recently, but it is expected to climb again by the end of the

year.

The strike idled about 80 percent of Setrerj's 3,767 carriers on the first day, dipping to about 75 percent on March 31.

Trinidad and Tobago: Cement workers' strike enters fifth week

The strike called February 28 by Trinidad and Tobago's Oil Workers Trade Union (OWTU) against Trinidad Cement Ltd (TCL) and TCL Packaging Ltd (TPL) continues. The action was called over the logjam in negotiations regarding retroactive salary increases for 2009-2011. TCL management's original offer was 6.5 percent while the union called for 16.

As soon as the strike—which the union had said could last for 90 days—began, TCL management went on the offensive, individually contacting each of the 600 striking workers and offering to make a separate deal if they would come back to work. It released press statements denouncing what it termed "terrorism" by picketers against strikebreakers coming to work in TCL-provided buses.

The union has reacted with its own ad in the *Guardian* daily pointing out the salaries, bonuses and benefits of TCL managers, as well as the profits made by TCL—TTD300 million (US \$47 million)—during 2009-2011. According to a *Trinidad Express* report, "The ad also criticized the police presence at the TCL strike camp in Claxton Bay. The union accused TCL of calling in battalions of heavily armed police officers and hiring four private security firms... The advertisement stated that the OWTU wants a peaceful resolution to the impasse and condemns any acts of violence and discrimination against workers or managers."

TCL has dismissed the ad as "propaganda" and refused to respond to the allegations. Claiming that the violence is solely the responsibility of the striking workers, TCL has hardened its stance, saying it will not return to negotiations until attacks on strikebreakers stop. Moreover, it has returned to its original 6.5 percent offer after briefly raising it to 7 percent.

The *Express* report also notes that the union has backed down from its 16 per cent wage raise demand and is now asking for 12 per cent. About 160 workers have returned to the job since the strike began.

T&T's Employers' Consultative Association has called for the Labour Ministry to refer the matter to the Industrial Court, a move that would put a stop to the strike action.

Red Cross workers strike in Ohio and Michigan

Red Cross workers went out on strike in Ohio and Michigan last week over understaffing, long hours and the organization's demand to implement a new and inferior health insurance plan. About 400 workers represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers and Teamsters walked off the job in Ohio, while some 200 members of the Teamsters and Office and Professional Employees International Union struck in Michigan.

Michigan workers have been unable to reach an agreement with the Red Cross since 2009 and have launched limited strikes four different times in the last two years. In 2009 the Red Cross brought in CEO Gail McGovern to streamline its services and eliminate an operating deficit. Meanwhile, McGovern collected a total compensation package of \$1,032,022 in her first year.

Illinois teachers hold ratification meeting after two-day strike

Teachers in Rockford, Illinois met with leaders of the Education Association March 30 to consider ratification of a new agreement after two days on the picket line. The strike by members of the Rockford Education Association was set in motion after a staggering March 26 vote of 1,482 to 74 to strike the district.

School Board officials declined to reveal the contents of the new four-year agreement until after the union's ratification. The board will follow up with a special meeting this week to officially sanction the contract. The strike by 1,850 teachers caused classes to be cancelled for some 27,000 students in the Rockford district.

Fresno, California musicians strike opera company

Orchestra musicians who perform for the Fresno Grand Opera threw up a picket line just two and a half hours before a March 27 concert featuring opera star Renee Fleming. Members of the American Federation of Musicians Local 12 had passed a strike

vote one day earlier but the unexpected strike forced management to cobble together a new program using piano accompaniment and 12 musicians who crossed picket lines instead of the usual 60-member orchestral backup.

Orchestra musicians have been without a contract since October 2010. Chief among musicians' complaints is policy whereby the management waits until as little as two days prior to a concert to hire musicians, despite the fact that schedules are set as much as one year in advance. The policy is a great inconvenience for musicians, who must derive their living from a variety of venues.

Strike barred for B.C. Anesthesiologists

A job action by anesthesiologists in the province of British Columbia that had been scheduled to begin this week has been halted by an injunction from the B.C. Supreme Court.

At the same time the law firm representing B.C. health authorities sent out a letter directly to the province's 400 anesthesiologists, bypassing their union, the B.C. Anesthesiologists' Society (BCAS), in an intimidating bid to halt any job action. This all in response to a long planned refusal for only half of the anesthesiologists in the province to participate in elective surgery this week.

Main issues in stalled contract talks centre on recruiting and retaining doctors, cutting waiting lists, patient safety and wages. BCAS says that health authorities were notified of this job action over three months ago but they went ahead and scheduled surgeries in any case, unnecessarily putting patients at risk. This dispute is a prelude to what awaits other public sector workers in the province who are voting on strike action this week.



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