

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 April 2012

## **Bolivian doctors call for renewal of strike over eight-hour decree**

Doctors and health workers in Bolivia's health department hospitals, clinics and health centers have called for the renewal of strike action on April 10 to protest the nullification of a four-decade-old law setting the doctors' workday at six hours. Supreme Decree 1126 would return the workday to eight hours. Doctors say the added hours will have a negative impact on their ability to treat their patients.

The doctors held a number of stoppages in March, one for 24 hours, one for 48 hours, and most recently an indefinite walkout beginning March 28. This most recent action was put on a 30-day "recess" after doctors met with the Health Ministry on April 3 and signed an agreement to attempt to resolve the issue through negotiation.

Immediately after the meeting, however, the Health Ministry published a communiqué that ordered that Decree 1126 be put into effect on April 10. The communiqué included a contingency plan for undercutting strike action by bringing in more than a thousand replacement workers.

The doctors denounced the declaration and issued a resolution that accused the Ministry of distorting the content of the agreement and calling for renewal of strike action on April 10. Each side has accused the other of unilaterally going back on the accord.

In Cochabamba, a group of health workers occupied the offices of the Department of Health Services (Sedes) to denounce the director, Guido Sánchez. The union's director said that Sánchez "has been going to all the hospitals and health centers in the urban and rural areas, intimidating the *compañeros*, announcing [legal] proceedings and firings to those who don't work."

## **Brazil: Protests against evictions, deindustrialization and rising cost of living**

Several of Brazil's sports stadiums were the scenes of protests last week. The stadiums are slated to be the sites of upcoming international sports events: the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament and the 2016 Olympics. The protests, organized by the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), were held to call attention to the evictions of working class families as a result of construction projects for the sports events.

On April 4, hundred of protesters entered São Paulo's Itaquerao stadium—where the World Cup games are set to kick off—and disrupted work for a brief time. Protesters blocked the road leading to Castelao Stadium in Fortaleza for about an hour and a half. Peaceful demonstrations were held in front of Estadio Maracana in Rio de

Janeiro, at Estadio Nacional in the capital of Brasilia and in the cities of Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Cuiaba and Manaus.

MTST organizers state that the projects required to meet the demands of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have resulted in the evictions of thousands of working-class families. They also claim that the lion's share of the benefits from hosting the games will go into the coffers of big business. MTST is calling for a national referendum on the World Cup.

In another action, some 90,000 industrial workers gathered in São Paulo and other cities on April 4 to protest the loss of manufacturing jobs in Brazil and the rising cost of living. Whatever the true sentiments of the workers may have been, declarations by the events' speakers—officials of some of Brazil's largest unions and employers' federations—had a decidedly nationalistic and pro-business tone.

According to an MSN report, "The demonstrators called for lower interest rates, lower taxes, action to bring down the value of the currency, the real, and to combat unfair foreign competition." Speakers denounced low-wage Asian countries, especially China, for waging "currency war" and undercutting Brazilian manufactured goods, and slammed the US and Europe for slashing interest rates and flooding Brazil with cheap dollars that have inflated the real.

## **Argentinean bus workers strike for 48 hours over working conditions, pay**

Bus drivers and other workers for three transportation companies in Argentina's northern Santa Fe and Córdoba provinces stopped work for 48 hours last week. The strike was called by the UTA motor transport union to demand improvements in working conditions and a raise in salaries.

The action followed a 24-hour strike March 30 over the lack of progress of parity negotiations between UTA and the Cetramps passenger travel business owners' association.

The three lines, Monticas, Las Rosas and Tata Rápido, serve about 40,000 daily commuters in the area.

## **Mexican technical workers strike auto plant**

Some 120 technical workers at a new Volkswagen plant in the central Mexican city of Silao, Guanajuato, went on strike April 1 over broken promises made by the company regarding salaries. The workers have called on section 15 of the CTM (Construction and Transport Industry Unions) to file a suit with the Conciliation and

Arbitration Board in Mexico City.

The majority of the workers are involved in the installation, assembly and mounting of machinery and testing of motors. Most of them are young graduates of technical universities who were given state government grants of 130 pesos (US\$10) a day during their training period. They now complain that promised salaries upon completion of training have fallen far short of expectations.

One of the workers told *Proceso*, “When we were in training, some of us were working in another business, but we came with the hope to get a better salary. That’s what the VW representatives were telling us, that it was going to be much higher than the grant...and now they aren’t coming through.

“When we saw the salary they were offering, we filed a demand before the Conciliation and Arbitration Board and went to ask for help from the CTM. They always told us we were going to earn more, that we wouldn’t be sorry.”

When the time for signing contracts arrived, the amount that VW offered came to 200 pesos (US\$15) per day. In their petition, the workers are demanding 500 pesos (\$38).

For now, 45 workers remain in the plant, a number determined by the Conciliation and Arbitration Board. Production is not yet in force, though some testing of engines is going on. The striking workers have set up pickets outside the plant.

### **New York day care workers strike over unpaid wages**

Day care workers at a Washington Heights non-profit facility in the borough of Manhattan, New York, are refusing to go to work after two and a half months without pay. Neither Alianza Dominicana, which runs La Familia Unida Day Care, nor the Department of Labor, which is investigating the case, have made public comment.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers District Council 1707, which represents the 30 workers, has filed four grievances over unpaid wages since 2010. The union reports that the unpaid wages have led to some workers being evicted from their apartments.

### **Teamsters union calls off Iowa Aluminum strike**

The Teamsters union announced April 6 it is calling off a two-and-a-half-month work stoppage against Nichols Aluminum in Davenport, Iowa, and is sending the 254 strikers back to work. The decision came one day after management announced it had signed contracts making the 110 replacement workers full-time employees.

Local 371 workers originally struck Nichols Aluminum on January 20 after the company unilaterally implemented a two-tier wage system and made radical changes in the health care plan. Within days of the strike, management started advertising for replacement workers while the Teamsters union kept the strike isolated.

### **Atlantic City casino workers rally against pension cuts**

Thousands of workers rallied outside of the Tropicana Casino and Resort in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to protest management’s decision to terminate the current pension fund and substitute direct cash payments to workers. The demonstration comes as UNITE HERE Local 54 has concluded contract negotiations with eight out of nine casinos in Atlantic City.

Tropicana announced an impasse in contract negotiations with the union earlier this year and declared that billionaire investor Carl Icahn, who purchased the casino in a bankruptcy sale, is not obligated to assume responsibility for the Tropicana’s previous pension obligations. According to Tropicana management, the pension fund for workers is underfunded by some \$1.3 billion.

### **Ottawa-area aerospace workers strike**

Nearly 400 workers employed by Haley Industries near Renfrew, Ontario, north of Ottawa went on strike last week after mediated talks failed to produce a new contract.

Workers at the plant, which produces airplane parts for Magellan Aerospace, had voted 96 percent in favor of strike action after their contract expired on March 15. Their union, the United Steelworkers, rejected the company’s final offer, indicating that the main issues in dispute included wages and pensions.

Haley industries, a subsidiary of Magellan Aerospace, has one of the region’s oldest manufacturing plants dating back over 60 years and is in line to build fighter jets for the Canadian military. According to the union, the company had accused the Ministry of Labour of being in cahoots with the union, but the company has refused to speak to reporters regarding the dispute.

### **New Brunswick transit workers poised to strike**

Bus drivers in Moncton, New Brunswick, could be on strike by the end of the week after negotiations reached an impasse late last week, and the city has warned commuters to make other arrangements to get to work.

Main issues in the dispute between the Amalgamated Transit Workers union (ATU) and Codiac Transpo, which provides bus service to the city of Moncton, center on wages and scheduling. Transit workers have been working without a contract since 2010 and have already voted by a margin of 94 percent in favor of strike action.

The union says it will meet with the membership later this week to make a decision on the strike, and the city has said it will not lock them out before getting the required 24-hour strike notice.



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