

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 December 2012

Limited strikes by Peruvian health care workers

Some 150 health care workers at the El Carmen Maternal and Children's Hospital in Huancayo, central Peruvian highlands went on a 48-hour strike December 12 and 13. The action was called by the El Carmen branch of the National Unified Health Sector Workers Federation (Fenutsa).

The workers protested overcrowding and the lack of up-to-date documents. They also demanded the removal of the hospital administrators, who they say are responsible for attacks on labor rights and poor service to patients.

Fenutsa general secretary Ricardo Quispe told reporters, "We live in a chaotic situation. There's no space to attend to the patients and we ask the regional government to accelerate the documentation of the new hospital. Also we have paupers' wages, and we do not enjoy bonuses."

Meanwhile on December 12, members of the northern highlands Cajamarca Medical Corps expressed their disagreement with the designation of the new director of the Cajamarca Regional Hospital and called for a one-day strike on December 14.

The second day of the Huancayo stoppage coincided with a 24-hour strike in Huancavelica—also in the central highlands—staged by public-sector employees demanding labor stability and opposing newly instituted civil service regulations that they say will weaken workers' rights.

Honduran psychiatric workers strike for 10 days over delayed paychecks

Around 550 psychiatric workers at two Honduran hospitals began a strike in early December over salaries owed to them for the month of November. The workers, employees of Mario Mendoza and Santa Rosita in Tegucigalpa, returned to work December 13 after receiving assurances from Health Secretary Roxana Araujo that the money had been deposited and that checks were forthcoming.

Araujo claimed that the payment lag, a frequent occurrence in Honduras's public sector, was due to other debts that left the hospitals without a budget, but "due to a reorientation of funds in the internal workings of the institution, the wages of the public employees, nurses and medical students were able to be paid," as reported in *La Tribuna*.

The minister added that for the next year, the department would

scrap its three-month contracts and only hire necessary personnel "under one budget roof."

Mexican government workers strike over working conditions

About 400 workers in the Civil Aeronautics, Ports and Merchant Marine departments of Mexico's Secretariat of Communications and Transport (SCT) in Mexico City struck December 10 over problems with the building housing the departments.

The hermetically sealed edifice has had problems with the water and air conditioning systems, resulting in cases of lack of water in the restrooms and foul air. Workers who complained to management were subjected to "obstinacy and threats," according to an *El Economista* report.

The situation went unresolved for three months. It was not until some employees fainted at their desks that their union, the National Communications and Transport Secretariat Workers Syndicate, called the strike and made their complaints public, resulting in the replacement of some of the management personnel.

A union official said that the new management has shown "openness to dialogue" and that the union hopes that relations between management will "improve in a significant manner," especially since the two parties will be negotiating over the new General Working Conditions regulations at the SCT in the first months of 2013.

Antigua and Barbuda: teachers stage sit-in over unpaid wages

Nearly 900 teachers in the Caribbean twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda, protesting recurring delays in payments of their salaries, engaged in "sit-ins" in which teachers came to their classrooms but refused to work.

Claiming financial straits, the government has been slow in depositing monies—due on the sixth day of the month following the pay period—in its account in the First Caribbean Bank for the last three months, not only for teachers, but for other public employees.

The teachers had already complained before to the Antigua & Barbuda Union of Teachers (ABUT), which, in an effort to stave off industrial action, made phone calls to the Ministry of Finance. Promises to return calls were never filled, according to ABUT

General Secretary Ashworth Azille. “In some cases,” Azille told *Caribarena Antigua*, “the telephone receiver was taken off the cradle and returned to the cradle.”

The protest actions started December 7 and continued to December 13, when Finance Minister Harold Lovell announced that final preparations were being made to deposit the last installment of teachers’ and other public servants’ salaries. The Minister said he could not confirm for certain that all teachers would be paid, but he was certain that significant relief would come on Thursday.”

Renewed strike at Washington state warehouse after company announces permanent replacements

Truckers and warehouse workers at a United Natural Foods (UNFI) distribution center in Auburn, Washington, returned to their picket lines December 13 after the company announced 72 of 165 striking Teamsters would be permanently replaced. Teamsters Local 117 members had walked out three days earlier over wages and unfair labor practices but the union ended the strike with what the union called a “good-faith” and unconditional offer to return to work.

United Natural Foods responded to that offer, saying, “The company will welcome back as many members of the Union as it can accommodate to reach full staffing levels.” When workers returned to work they were told by security guards they were no longer employed.

The old agreement between the company and union expired February 29 of this year. An extension to that contract ran out at the end of August. United Natural Foods offered the Teamsters a 10.8 percent wage increase over three years. But the union charges that UNFI workers already make 25 percent less than other workers at distribution centers in western Washington state. The union has also documented cases of threats, intimidation and discrimination by the company.

UNFI, meanwhile, has seen its revenues increase by 83 percent in the last five years, while profit margins have remained at 18 percent over that time.

Federal judge orders striking workers reinstated in Connecticut nursing home strike

A federal judge has ordered a Connecticut nursing home company to reinstate some 600 striking workers to their jobs and rescind pension and health care cuts. Judge Robert Chatigny issued the order December 11 and stipulated the company must carry out the measure by next Monday, even if it means replacement workers must be let go. HealthBridge Management, which operates the five struck Connecticut facilities, has said it will appeal the decision.

Members of District 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) walked off the job back on July 3 after the company declared an impasse and unilaterally imposed increases in medical benefits that could cost individual workers as much as \$7,300 a year. Another demand called for the termination of pensions.

In July, an administrative law judge found for HealthBridge and against the union, which objected to the company’s refusal to deduct union dues going back to March 16, 2011. But in September the National Labor Board recommended an injunction against HealthBridge’s benefit cuts and this past week Chatigny carried that out.

In October, HealthBridge filed a RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) suit against the SEIU over their bargaining. The SEIU responded that their contract proposals were based on a pattern agreement accepted by fifty other nursing homes.

Rolling teachers strikes hit Ontario

In the ongoing protest against recent Provincial anti-union legislation, public school teachers are continuing a campaign of one-day strikes at school boards across the province.

Along with strikes in Ottawa, Hamilton, and at a number of other elementary school boards in more remote areas, this week also saw strikes at three of the largest boards in the province in the Toronto area. Although much is being made in the press of the impact of the rotating strikes on parents and students, union leaders have been giving 72 hours notice and limiting strikes to a single day.

In most cases, schools are cancelling classes for the strikes and the government has pledged not to intervene with its newly legislated powers that would allow it to ban the strikes, so long as they remain limited to one-day actions.



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