

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 January 2013

Chile: Strike ends at Santiago Hospital

Health workers ended a two-day strike at the Public Health Hospital for Emergency Care (Hospital, de Urgencia de la Asistencia Pública, in Spanish, commonly known as Posta Central). The short strike was over substandard conditions at the hospital and the harassment of hospital employees by management.

The walkout by the union of professionals, technicians, and helpers (gremio de profesionales, técnicos y auxiliares—GPTA) began last Wednesday, December 26. A key demand was that Human Resources chief María Loreto Valenzuela be separated from her functions, together with manager Emilio Villalón.

Initially Health ministry officials had declared the strike illegal and refused to negotiate with the hospital workers. However, they did agree to the firing of Ms. Valenzuela. Mr. Villalón will remain for now at his post. GPTA leader Oscar Arellana claimed that the workers had given in on the Villalón demand because they had won 90 percent of their demands.

Orellana said protests would continue to demand Villalón's departure. Health Minister Jaime Mañalich indicated that he considered the mobilizations illegal and irrelevant, and defended the functioning of the Public Hospital. Mañalich's words notwithstanding, Posta Central is notorious for delivering substandard service to its patient population, many of whom are indigent.

The dispute had been simmering since March 2012, when Daniel Zamudio, a victim of an extremely brutal homophobic beating, died at Posta Central. Zamudio seemed to be recovering from the beating but appears to have died from a bacterial infection at the hospital, from the *Clostridium Difficile* bacteria. An investigation revealed contamination at Posta Central from another, far more aggressive, bacteria,

Acinetobacter, at its burn clinic.

Following Zamudio's death, both Mañalich tried to cover up for the conditions at the hospital.

Argentina Bank clerks on strike

Argentine banks were paralyzed on Friday. The union that represents bank clerks (La Bancaria) called the strike. La Bancaria leader Sergio Palazzo declared that the protest strike had been 'a total success.' Palazzo also warned that there would be a 48-hour strike in ten days if no progress were made in negotiations with the banks.

The Labor Ministry has imposed mandatory arbitration and threatened La Bancaria with massive fines if the protest strikes and mobilizations continue. In addition to salary increases, the clerks are denouncing the excessive profits in the banking industry.

La Bancaria had been organizing protest strikes since the beginning of 2012, mainly against public banks, demanding wage increases beyond the 15 percent raise being offered by management, plus an emergency bonus of 1,800 pesos (US \$360). The union also demands that the current contract be enforced, including a working day of 7.5 hours.

Friday's was the first strike involving private, public, and foreign across this nation of 41 million. In all, 103,000 bank clerks were involved in this protest.

Record number of protests in Venezuela in 2012

The Venezuelan Observer of Social Conflict

(Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, in Spanish, OVCS) reported 532 protests in November, up from 521 October. The OVCS also reported 19 hunger strikes. Two-hundred seventeen of those had to do with workers' rights, 201 with struggles over housing, 97 struggles over political rights and 18 had to do with education.

According to the report, in the last trimester of the year, there had been an explosion of workers struggles across Venezuela. In November, most of these had been marches, rallies and street and highway barricades. Most of these mobilizations involved struggles over wages.

Working class families were also involved in many of the protests over housing. Many families that lost their homes as a result of torrential rains in 2011 are still waiting for homes promised by the Chavez administration.

OVCS spokesperson Antonio Ponce indicated that social protests have increased every year in Venezuela since 2006, and predicted another record in 2013. "For the most part, these protests are not politically led," said Ponce, "social classes are demanding their rights."



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Ohio manufacturing strike passes one week mark

Production workers at the RJF International Corporation plant near Marietta, Ohio, were scheduled to meet December 31, after one week on strike over contract language. Few details are available in the dispute involving over 140 members of the International Chemical Workers Union Council. Workers fear that changes in contract language will undermine seniority.

Among its products, RJF manufactures wall covering for the housing industry, which has been hard hit by the downturn in housing construction. The company is now taking advantage of the expiration of the current five-year contract to overcome economic problems.

The Chemical Workers Union launched the strike on December 23, one day before a holiday shutdown. After the New Year's holiday, the company will resume production. RJF was previously a division of B.F. Goodrich.