

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 July 2013

Latin America

Peruvian public sector medical workers strike over wage demands

Some 15,000 Peruvian public sector medical workers began a strike on July 16 to demand a wage increase. In the capital Lima, members of the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP) marched to the Congress to call on the legislature to approve the increase. The medical workers claim that Peru's president, Ollanta Humala, reneged on a 2012 agreement to raise salaries.

Intensive care and emergency services remained operational, though the situation is complicated by an outbreak of AH1N1 swine flu.

On July 18, about 70,000 nurses joined the strike. The president of the Health Ministry Nurses Federation, Zoila Cotrina, blamed the government's refusal to engage in a dialogue. Cotrina called on Health Minister Midori de Habich to engage in "dialogue to carry out the commitments regarding salaries and give needed attention to the problems of the health sector, that is very delayed." The medical workers are also demanding that a greater share of the national budget be allotted the public health sector.

That same day, military hospital doctors set up pickets at a children's hospital and at the Ministry of Defense, demanding the payment of raises agreed upon with the Health Ministry (Minsa) last October. They were joined by dentists, assistants, lab workers and psychologists.

De Hibach, claiming that the government has "assured the resources for a salary increment this year, not only for the doctors but for health workers as a whole, as was agreed," called the strike "totally unjustified."

On July 19, FMP officials began discussions with their Minsa counterparts, but the strike remained in force.

Peruvian sanitation workers strike over "insulting" wage offer

About 1,500 sanitation workers for the waste management firm Relima Ambiental, which has the trash collection contract with the city of Lima, Peru, went on strike July 16 over wage demands. The walkout followed a protest the night before of some 200 workers, members of the Sitobur sanitation workers union.

The workers currently make about 800 soles (US\$290) a month. Relima offered an increase of 3 soles (US\$1.08) a day, an amount that Sitobur secretary general Raúl Oviedo called "an insult to our dignity as workers."

On July 18, the union called the workers back to the job after a five-hour meeting with the labor vice-minister, the municipal government and Relima negotiators. Oviedo told reporters that the decision was taken after Relima promised to improve its salary hike offer.

24-hour strike by Argentine hospital workers to protest salary cuts, deterioration of public hospitals

On July 18, doctors and biochemists at various Buenos Aires public hospitals went on a 24-hour strike. The strike call was issued by the City Professionals Federation and the Municipal Doctors Association. Emergency services and security were unaffected.

The strike was called to protest a recent announcement by the city government that there had been a "technical error" in the calculation of salaries agreed to in parity talks last year, and that the salaries of 15,000 medical and other professionals were to be cut by 1,000 to 1,500 pesos (US\$183-275). The first cuts were reflected in salary payments June 30.

In a July 8 interview with Agencia Paco Urondo, Dr. Jorge Pachamé, described as "a minority member of the executive committee of municipal doctors," denounced the cuts, the city government of Mayor Mario Macri and the workings of the unions. He criticized the secretive manner—"we define them as clandestine"—in which the unions held negotiations, and noted: "The accords were signed, and it is remarkable that nine months later somebody comes to tell us that there is an error." He added that due to the "error," some colleagues are going to earn less in 2013 than they made in 2012.

Pachamé went on to denounce the "hollowing out" of public health under Macri, which includes shortages of nurses, doctors and supplies, privatizations, closures of intensive care units, neurosurgery and other departments. Agencia Paco Urondo, which describes itself as a "Kirchnerist" journal, made no mention of the role of the administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in the current health care crisis.

Suriname: Small-scale miners fight evictions

Following the Suriname government's awarding of a gold mining concession to a Canadian company, small-scale miners in the northeastern province of Brokopondo have engaged in protests. The miners are mostly Maroons, the descendants of escaped slaves who lived in villages near the gold-mining fields granted in June to Rosebel.

Rosebel is a joint venture between the Surinamese government and Canadian firm Iamgold.

According to caribseek.com, the Rosebel mine "produced 402,000 ounces of gold and saw US\$655.7 million in gross income in 2012. The new agreement means tens of millions in income for Suriname, and government obviously held no punches in securing this."

The government set up a Gold Sector Regulating (or "Ordening") Commission in 2011 to gain control over mining in the region, where small-scale miners eke out a living, at times causing environmental damage. Ordening forces, who have removed small-scale miners from illegal mines before without incidents, have gotten more heavy-handed in the case of Rosebel, and on July 17 raided an illegal mine, destroyed machinery and equipment and pushed miners back into their villages.

Miners reacted, setting fire to a Rosebel bus and pickup truck carrying mineworkers. Police intervened when the small-scale miners pelted the house of a village captain (elder), where fleeing Rosebel mineworkers sought refuge.

The government has offered the small-scale miners a 7,000-square-hectare area away from the Rosebel concession, but since it is far from their villages, the miners have said they will not relocate. They expressed anger over the concession to Rosebel of an area about 500 meters (550 yards) from their village, and the violence of security forces, who “pushed us out of the gold mine like wild boar. They came in firing,” as one miner described their dislodging.

Costa Rican public health interns protest nonpayment of scholarships

About 300 public health system interns protested in front of Costa Rica’s Social Security System headquarters in San Jose on July 17. The interns protested the nonpayment of scholarships amounting to about \$440 per month. Most of the interns have not been paid in seven months.

The Social Security System, known as the Caja (“box”), has paid medical interns the scholarship since 1982, but this year, claiming budget constraints, the Caja stopped the payments to divert the funds to pay management and administration costs.

Interns, who already have completed their coursework, often work six days a week during their one-year internships. The monthly payment during that time is equal to a little over a third of a general practitioner’s salary. To the demand that they should be compensated for their labors, Caja officials now claim that the internship is a requirement for graduation; they are not Caja employees and, as such, the agency is not required to pay them.

United States

Tentative agreement ends Buffalo-area emergency medical strike

Rural/Metro Medical Services and the Teamsters union reached a tentative agreement July 16, just hours after 450 EMT’s (Emergency Management Technicians) and paramedics walked out on strike in the two-county area surrounding Buffalo, New York. Teamsters Local 375 officials declined to reveal details, except to say that the new four-year proposal offers a wage increase and some benefit improvements.

Several weeks earlier, union members rejected by a 99 percent vote an earlier offer by Rural/Metro. According to a Buffalo City Council member, EMT’s were not being paid the current \$12.47 living wage required by the city. Further, EMT’s were being paid a lower wage when responding to medical emergencies outside Buffalo city limits.

One week before the strike, the city council approved a six-month contract extension with Rural/Metro, providing the company with an exclusive agreement. Rural/Metro had brought in some 50-70 workers from its operations in other regions.

Rural/Metro, based in Scottsdale, Arizona, operates in 22 states. It was acquired in 2011 by Warburg Pincus, a global private equity firm, for \$438 million.

Union seeks to divert Minnesota strike by appeals to city government

The union representing 40 striking workers at Cretex Companies in Shakopee, Minnesota appeared before the local mayor and city council July 16 in an effort to create the illusion that their struggle against benefit cuts will be embraced by local politicians. Laborers Local 563 business agent Tim Mackey addressed the meeting, saying, “We’d like to ask for some help,” and appealed to the city government to put pressure the company to return to the bargaining table. No action was taken by the mayor or council members.

Cretex management has insisted on cutting retirement benefits by 80 percent. The company, which operates 23 plants throughout the Midwestern United States, has eliminated pensions at facilities in North Dakota and Iowa. Production is continuing at the Shakopee facility by management personnel and staff from other Cretex plants.

Canada

Locked-out Toronto funeral home workers face injunction

Locked-out workers at funeral home giant Service Corporation International (SCI) are facing a possible injunction against picketing at Delmoro funeral home in north Toronto after the company made application to the Ontario Superior Court last week.

The 30 workers, who were locked out June 27, are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Central issues in stalled contract negotiations include wages, working conditions and compulsory work on statutory holidays.

Although union leaders have expressed regret for the action, workers have been picketing at Delmoro and other homes run by its parent company, which has over 1,500 funeral homes in North America. Delmoro says that regular operations have not been interrupted by the lockout.

Township workers face lockout in central Ontario

Municipal workers in the Township of Bonfield near North Bay, Ontario are facing a possible lockout after unanimously rejecting management’s final contract offer last week.

The 16 workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been working without a contract since the end of 2011 and are facing wide-ranging concession demands from the Township in contract negotiations, which have now collapsed.

A lockout would see the suspension of road maintenance, waste disposal and numerous administrative services.

Ontario steelworkers locked out

Some 100 locked-out steelworkers at the Max Aicher North America steel operations in Hamilton, Ontario began receiving the equivalent of strike pay from United Steelworkers Local 1005 last week. Max Aicher first locked out workers at the beginning of July.

The lockout began after workers rejected massive concessions by a 73 percent margin. Company management demanded \$10-an-hour pay cuts, the termination of pensions and cost-of-living allowances, and reductions in benefits for both current workers and retirees. In their place, the

company offered a \$5-an-hour incentive plan.

Max Aicher purchased the Hamilton operations from Stelco in 2010. In November of last year, the company laid off the entire plant workforce, citing depressed prices. The company's CEO, David Cameron, has declared it will be impossible to continue operations without concessions from workers.



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