

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 July 2013

Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals in Peru have continued their strike and protest actions for wage increases and improvements in working conditions. On July 16, 15,000 medical workers went on strike, with the exception of emergency and intensive care services. They were joined two days later by 70,000 nurses.

Strikers have engaged in various actions to dramatize their demands. In Arequipa, doctors held a sit-in to demand the firing of Health Minister Midori Hibach. In Puno, doctors marched in the central city. In Lima, doctors and nurses chained themselves to the entrance of a downtown hospital.

On July 26, some 2,500 medical workers and sympathizers marched to the Health Ministry (Minsa), where nurses burned a cardboard coffin. Police attacked them with tear gas and water cannon. Later, some of the doctors declared themselves on hunger strike.

One of the demonstrators told *El Popular*, “We want the minister and the president to listen to us. We work in inadequate conditions.”

Health Minister Midori Hibach, whom the strikers have denounced for breaking a promise she signed in October to increase their wages and for her refusal to engage in dialogue, claimed that only 30 percent of doctors and 13 percent of nurses were on strike.

## Chilean supermarket workers strike for better wages, conditions

Following the failure of contract negotiations, workers at the Jumbo supermarket in Calama, Chile, struck July 24. Striking workers demonstrated in front of the supermarket and denounced management’s inflexibility in salary talks.

Calama, located in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile, is one of the most expensive cities in the nation in terms of food prices, and a source of high profits for the supermarket.

The workers also accused management of anti-union practices, as well as “irregularities” in product quality that have a negative impact on customers. One banner declared, “Jumbo deceives the people of Calama about quality.” Signs demanding, “No more changing dates on chicken!” expressed a complaint that workers have voiced before.

*El Diario de Antofagasta* reported, “The enterprise, as well, did not respond by paying attention to the workers’ needs, but by soliciting the carabineros [national police force] to come to the site to silence the demonstration.”

## Colombian coal miners strike to protest planned layoffs, pay, and safety problems

Mineworkers for US-based Drummond’s Colombian coal operations went on strike July 23 over pay and upcoming layoffs. Workers have set up picket encampments at the company’s installations.

Drummond, the nation’s second-largest coal producer, operates two mines and a port in Colombia, accounting for around 26 million tons in 2012. About half its 10,000 workers are unionized.

The company and the workers’ union, Sintramienergética, have been in negotiations for weeks. The union proposed a 9 percent pay increase, while Drummond’s latest offer was 4.75 percent with a one-time bonus of 7,000 pesos (US\$3,700). Citing current and projected low prices of coal on the world market, company spokespeople called the offer “excellent.”

Drummond also refuses to agree to the union demand for a fixed monthly base salary, instead insisting on paying hourly wages.

Another important issue is the planned layoff of some 400 workers at Drummond’s port facility due to the introduction of a conveyor belt system. Drummond has refused to commit to finding other positions for all the laid-off workers, promising positions for 70 percent. Finally, the union is calling for better methods of preventing accidents and deaths, which have climbed to 19 this year.

## Costa Rican holiday brings protests against deteriorating living standards

July 25 is Costa Rica’s Annexation of Guanacaste Day, a national holiday celebrating the official establishment of the northwestern Guanacaste region as a province in 1824. In recent years, the day has become the occasion for protests against high unemployment, growing inequality, and inadequate funding for social services.

With scenic beaches along its Pacific coastline, Guanacaste is a favorite spot for tourists, who stay at its luxury hotels. The tourist industry regularly receives preferential treatment when it comes to taxes and infrastructure.

Not far from the hotels, shantytowns and dirt roads are a familiar sight. Health care is virtually nonexistent, infrastructure is poor and, despite generating 45 percent of the nation’s electricity, the province has the highest electricity rates in the country. Its official poverty rate, 21.8 percent, is 50 percent higher than the national average.

In addition to the economic complaints, Guanacastecos suffer elevated levels of arsenic in their water supply, levels that researchers blame for rates of chronic kidney failure that are 18 percent higher than the national average.

On the morning of July 25 in the provincial city of Nicoya, some 500 protesters marched to the central park, where their numbers swelled to more than 2,000. Several national unions, as well as social and environmental organizations, organized the march and other actions. Sympathizers from other regions came to support the protesters, with the ANDE educators’ union claiming to have brought in 22 busloads of supporters of the protests.

## Jamaican sugar factory security workers protest layoffs

Security personnel at three Jamaican sugar factories—Monymusk, Bernard Lodge, and Frome, all managed by the Pan Caribbean Sugar Company—protested July 22 against being placed on “discretionary leave” the day before.

At Bernard Lodge, in St. Catherine parish, the protesting workers blocked the entrance and prevented operations. At the other two plants, although the laid-off guards held protests, they did not prevent work from continuing.

The guards are members of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU), the University and Allied Workers Union (UAWU), and the National Workers’ Union (NWU).

Pan Caribbean has been cutting back its workforce for several months in the name of “restructuring.” UAWU official Clifton Grant told RJRNewsOnline.com, “You’re talking about 178 in March, 90 last week and now 140,” the last referring to the guards. Pan Caribbean has reportedly hired a private security firm to replace the workers.

On July 25, police were posted at the Frome factory to prevent further protest actions. Meanwhile, the unions met with company reps at the Ministry of Labour, where Pan Caribbean refused to reinstate the guards. Another meeting has been scheduled for August 2.

### **Sickout by Trinidadian insurance workers over job insecurity**

Several branches of the Caribbean region’s largest insurance firm, CLICO, closed early July 25 due to a number of employees and agents calling in sick. The company would not divulge the exact number of non-reporting employees.

CLICO’s future has been uncertain for several years. The company collapsed in 2009, and the then-chairman requested and received a financial rescue of \$20 billion (US\$198 million) from the government, money that failed to revive the firm. In order to recover the money, the government announced earlier this year that CLICO would be shut down and its assets taken over by another company, Atrius.

Since then, doubts about the takeover have emerged, causing concerns among employees and agents about their job security. The sickout “would have been to show dissatisfaction over what agents feel is the uncertainty about the company’s future,” according to the *Trinidad Express*.

A CLICO official “preferred to not comment” on the sickout. And according to the *Express*, “Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union president Vincent Cabrera referred enquiries to deputy vice president Mario Als, who could not be immediately reached by cell phone yesterday afternoon. The union represents the interests of CLICO employees, Cabrera said.”

### **Pennsylvania mechanics strike over retirement benefits**

New talks have been scheduled this week in the nearly two-week old unfair labor practices strike by mechanics against the Cleveland Brothers Equipment Company in Western Pennsylvania. The International Union of Operating Engineers Local 66 called the strike back on July 19, alleging management had circumvented the union by initiating direct contact with workers.

After two months of negotiations, the two sides are believed to be separated over the issue of retirement benefits. The old contract agreement expired on June 30. Two weeks ago, a federal mediator failed to resolve the retirement issue.

About 275 mechanics who service heavy equipment at eight of Cleveland Brothers’ 26 locations are involved in the contract struggle. The struck sites include Murrysville, New Stanton, Blawnox, Cranberry, Somerset, Lantz Corner, Clearfield and Erie.

### **California mental health workers strike over wages and working conditions**

Workers at the La Casa Mental Health Rehabilitation Center in Long Beach, California carried through a five-day strike last month calling attention to dangerous working conditions. About 175 mental health workers, counselors, and nurses voted to join the Service Workers International Union back in February of 2012 and have been working for over a year without a contract.

Workers are paid a starting wage of \$9 an hour. Management engaged in negotiating tactics such as offering tiny raises combined with benefit takeaways. The five-day strike was initiated back on June 26.

The union has been emphasizing the dangers that workers at the facility face. Over the past three years, company statistics reveal there have been 640 assaults. During the same period, the Long Beach Police Department responded to more than 230 calls from the facility.

### **Foreign diplomats escalate job action**

The months-long dispute between the federal government and foreign service workers intensified last week when their union announced it was raising the number of missions on strike from three to fifteen, aimed at pressuring Treasury Board head Tony Clement to agree to binding arbitration.

Beginning last April when they entered a legal strike position, the nearly 1,500-member Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers (PAFSO) launched rotating job actions at various overseas offices disrupting visa applications to Canada. The expansion of those strikes to include the busiest centers around the world is in response to what the union is calling bad faith bargaining on the part of the Treasury Board, which it says has thrown up “paralyzing” obstacles to binding arbitration.

PAFSO has been demanding wage parity with government employees doing comparable work in other departments, a demand that the federal government has so far rejected.



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