

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 August 2013

Colombian coal miners strike in third week

A strike begun by coal miners in northern Colombia remained in effect as their union reentered talks with management August 6. The union, Sintramienergética, walked out of negotiations with US-based mining company Drummond on July 23 over pay, conditions, benefits and other issues.

Drummond released a communiqué stating that two of the unions from the company's two mines and one port facility had previously met with management, and claimed "the Sintramienergética delegates refused to attend."

The communiqué did not mention that the other two unions, Sintradrummond and Agretritrenes, were created by the company and represent only about 400 of 5,000 workers. A Sintramienergética official noted that, with 2,900 members, the union was in the majority and, regarding the other two unions, Drummond "already imposed the terms of negotiation."

Sintramienergética is calling for a 9 percent pay increase with inflation-linked increases every year. Drummond's original offer was for 4.75 percent, with a one-time bonus equivalent to US\$3,700. The company raised the offers to 5 percent and US\$4,500, but the union rejected them.

Other issues include safety and health, housing, education and other benefits, and the fate of 400 workers who will be terminated when a conveyor belt system is installed at the port.

Peruvian nurses end strike, doctors remain out

On August 8, over 500 striking nurses in Peru's Health Ministry (Minsa) marched to within a few

blocks of the Congress in central Lima, where a cordon of police met them, preventing them from presenting their demands for higher wages and more funding for the health sector.

On the same day, doctors for Minsa as well as Peru's social security agency Essalud marched separately to the Council of Ministers. About 15,000 doctors have been on strike for over a month, demanding payment of a promised raise from last year as well as improvements in infrastructure and the provision of adequate supplies and medications.

On August 10, after three weeks on strike, the nurses agreed to return to work, accepting the government's pay offer.

The nurses' union president, Zoila Cotrina, told reporters that the nurses had accepted a raise of 1,000 soles (US\$358), which will take effect in September. The monthly salary for nurses will range from 2,200 soles (US\$788) to 2,800 soles (US\$1,003).

On August 9, an extensive meeting between government representatives and negotiators for the Peru Medical Federation (FMP) failed to reach an agreement. The doctors remained on strike.

Partial strike by Panamanian teachers over privatization decree

On July 30, teachers in nine of sixteen Panamanian teachers unions went on strike to demand the repeal of a decree that they fear would open the door to the privatization of education and increase job insecurity.

Decree 920, passed on October 30, 2012, in the guise of modernization, efficiency and "excellence," would adapt curricula, hiring procedures, promotions and evaluations to market criteria and lead to the privatization of public education.

The five nonstriking unions, though they oppose the decree, claim that a strike is the wrong means for getting it repealed. They have been negotiating with the Education Ministry (Meduca) for 14 months without accomplishing anything.

The strike was initially planned to last only a few days, but due to the intransigence of Education Minister Lucy Molinar, it was extended. On August 7, parents and teachers in some provinces joined teachers in blocking roads and protesting conditions in their schools, including unhealthy environments and lack of potable water.

On August 8, two of the nonstriking unions, the Professors Association or Asoprof, and the National Education Workers Syndicate, left the negotiations and joined the strike for 48 hours to protest Molinar's firing of Andrés Rodríguez, a professor for 40 years who had called her a "dictator."

On August 9, Molinar, while accusing the teachers of being "anchored in the past" and of fomenting "a sea of lies," announced the withdrawal of Decree 920. Yadira Pino, director of the Veraguas Educators Association, told reporters that the strike would not be suspended until Molinar signed a document affirming that there would be no reprisals against any striking teacher.

Contract ratified following one-day strike by Minnesota laundry workers

Hospital laundry workers in St. Paul, Minnesota ratified a new contract August 7, two days after a one-day strike against Health Systems Cooperative Laundries. According to Workers United Local 150, which represents the 240 workers, the walkout was triggered by management's demand to terminate sick day benefits. Local 150 officials claim the company restored these after the one-day strike.

On July 26, Health Systems Cooperative Laundries issued their "last, best and final offer." Besides the disagreement over sick days, the earlier proposal would also eliminate leave-of-absence language and alter terms by which the union could bargain over mid-term contract language. The Local 150 leadership was also concerned about retaining the bargaining unit should

the laundry be sold to another entity.

Health Systems Cooperative Laundries supplies sterilized bed linens to some of the largest hospitals in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

California hospital workers charged with sickout as contract talks loom

Radiology technicians at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in California allegedly staged a sickout last week. Hospital CEO Paul Lorenz sent out an email in which he stated, "The past couple of days at VMC have been a challenge due to the increasing number of 'sick calls'".

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 521 denied knowledge of the action. The SEIU represents some 6,400 workers employed at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center complex.

Manitoba health care workers take to picket line

One hundred sixty health care aides at Lions Housing Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, Manitoba held an informational picket last Thursday to protest against chronic understaffing and stalled contract talks.

Although workers at the personal care facility have been without a contract since September of last year, their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has yet to hold a strike vote. While the issue of working short staffed is a primary concern, the workers are also fighting against intolerably low wages.

This follows a similar action taken by workers at Maples Personal Care Home who held a four-day picket in July before gaining a new contract.



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