

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 October 2013

Strike by Salvadoran hospital workers over unpaid wage scale

Employees of 24 public hospitals, 45 family health centers and other branches of El Salvador's Health Ministry struck on September 25. The most affected departments were external consultations, elective surgeries and administrative areas. Emergency services continued to function. Among the striking workers were over 8,000 nurses.

Adhesion to the strike varied, from 100 percent at the Rosales national hospital to 60 percent at the San Bartolo facility, to zero at the Berlin, Usulután health center, where "employees tried to join in a strike, but not having the support of all the employees, they returned to their labors," according to *elsalvador.com*.

The workers are demanding that they be paid according to legally established wage-scale increments, while union officials accuse the ministry of waste and mismanagement of funds. The health minister, Maria Isabel Rodriguez, claims that the Treasury Department informed her that due to the economy, the Health Ministry cannot pay the raises. "All the salary scales are suspended," Rodriguez told reporters, although she maintained that they were not eliminating the benefit.

Rodriguez later softened her previous statement by saying that the Treasury would analyze whether the funds could be found to finance the more than US\$30 million owed the workers. Luis Moran, Health Ministry Workers Syndicate finance secretary, countered that at no time had the government sent "signals of wanting to dialogue about the problem."

Representatives of a number of Salvadoran unions declared that the strike would remain in effect until the authorities initiate negotiations, and that protests would intensify if they did not.

Honduran bus drivers strike over nonpayment of raises and bonuses

Traffic was snarled in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa September 26 by a strike of over 400 urban bus drivers over the nonpayment of promised bonuses and subsidies. The drivers parked their buses along 20 of the city's main routes, slowing traffic.

The drivers were protesting the nonpayment of subsidies and bonuses that the transportation ministry had agreed in negotiations to pay, but has yet to make good on.

As he has done on the occasion of other strike actions, right-wing president Porfirio Lobos, who came to power following the 2009 coup d'état that ousted president Manuel Zelaya, denounced the action as a "political protest."

Chilean kindergarten workers strike, march for improved labor conditions

About 100 kindergarten workers marched September 26 in Rancagua, the main city of the region of O'Higgins, to demand improvements in labor conditions. The protesters are employed by the state kindergarten agency known as Junji (National Kindergarten Council).

The mobilization had a participation rate of about 84 percent, according to Maria Elena Claro, Junji regional director. Since the parents of the children had been informed of the planned march, attendance was low at the kindergartens.

Marchers carried signs, whistled, chanted and beat on percussion instruments. The principal themes of the march were progress on negotiations with the government and respect for labor rights. Claro complained to *El Rancagüino*, "We've been in negotiations, we have sent letters to the Finance Minister, and we have signed an agreement with him by which the Law of Programs was going to be introduced in the Congress, but there is still nothing concrete."

Claro depicted the march as a warning shot for possible broader actions future actions, such as an indefinite strike if the government continues to ignore the demands. Among those demands are recognition of union contracts, lessening of workloads and unfreezing of salaries.

Brazilian bank employees continue strike over wages, conditions

Over 10,580 public and private banks and administrative agencies remained closed as of September 27 due to a strike by bank employees. The striking workers, who walked out on September 19, are demanding "a salary raise of 11.93 percent, an increase in the minimum salary, the end of layoffs and moral abuses, better working conditions, and greater participation in profits," as reported by *Prensa Latina*. Other demands include job security and more opportunities for workers of African descent.

Strikes by bank employees are hampered by the availability of ATM and Internet banking for many transactions. Bank workers took industrial action for nine days around this time last year over their demand for a 10.25 percent pay raise. They returned to work after accepting a 7.5 percent raise.

This year, the Brazilian Bank Federation has offered a 6.1 percent raise, representing a cut in salary when inflation is taken into consideration. *Nasdaq.com* reported, "In the latest talks, the banks have argued that an economic slowdown has increased levels of overdue loans, and falling interest rates have squeezed margins, but the unions have rejected these arguments."

In Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Fortaleza, Belo Horizonte, Salvador and other cities, workers held mobilizations and marches.

Limited strikes in Peru over government labor policies

On September 26, thousands of members of the Workers General Confederation of Peru (CGTP) struck for one day to protest the anti-labor policies of the government of president Ollanta Humala.

In some cities, marches, demonstrations and blockades took place as well. In Lima, 5,000 demonstrators gathered in the city center to attempt a march on the Congress and Government Palace, but over 6,000 National Police had been sent there beforehand to stand guard and intimidate the protesters. No major incidents were reported.

CGTP General Secretary Mario Huaman denounced Humala for breaking promises of a “grand transformation” and accused him of attempting to “liquidate the union movement like Fujimorism did...because there’s no collective negotiation and there’s no syndical freedom.” Huaman cited as an example the firings of over 3,000 workers for affiliating with a union.

In addition, “A central demand of the CGTP is the derogation of the law of the Civil Service because it promotes massive firings in public administration and violates collective bargaining and labor freedom,” reported Terra. The labor minister responded by claiming that Civil Service policies were aimed toward “efficiency” and “quality.”

Meanwhile, Peru’s national mining federation called a 48-hour strike to protest changes in the pension system. A recently passed government decree increases the number of beneficiaries in a mining pension program, a measure that mineworkers fear will dilute eventual payments.

Although some mine operations were completely halted, production continued at others, “either because of company back-up plans or because many workers were staying on the job, union leaders and company officials said,” according to a *Reuters* report.

Strike and lockout end at Ohio hospital without resolution of issues

Nurses continued to return to their jobs over the weekend at ValleyCare Northside Medical Center in Youngstown, Ohio, following a one-day strike that triggered a lockout. About 485 nurses of the Ohio Nurses Association held a one-day strike September 24 over staffing and patient care issues.

When nurses attempted to return to work the following day management issued letters to each individual nurse that allowed some to return while refusing others. A hospital spokesperson claimed that until a 72-hour contract for replacement nurses expired, many nurses would be barred from returning to their jobs.

Clearly, management’s tactic had little to do with stipulations regarding the replacement subcontractor, but was aimed at breaking up the unity of nurses. When the nurses union first announced their intention to strike, management declared it would fire any nurses who participated.

The strike and lockout appears to have done nothing to alter the opposition of nurses to ValleyCare Northside’s drive to implement a flexible staffing system that would allow management to call in and send nurses home based upon the fluctuation of patients. Meanwhile, nurses are seeking contract language that gives them specific rights to advocate for patient safety.

California first responders strike ends with union decertification

First responders in El Centro, California voted 51-35 to decertify the Teamsters union September 27, bringing a 62-day strike against Gold Cross Ambulance Service to a close. About 60 workers launched their

strike at the end of July having gone 6 years without a pay increase and opposed to management’s demand that that health coverage only cover the employee and not family members. Gold Cross Emergency Medical Technicians make \$8 per hour, medical dispatchers \$9 and paramedics make just over \$9 an hour.

Gold Cross Ambulance Service, which holds a contract with Imperial County for first responder service, immediately hired replacement workers and some of them qualified to vote in the decertification election. As a result, replacement workers combined with workers who crossed the picket line to end Teamster representation. Under the decertification, workers have the right to form their own independent bargaining committee to negotiate with management.

Gold Cross management has declared that it will not allow some striking workers back. The bitter strike involved many picket line altercations that are being used to victimize workers. In some cases, strikers charge that incidents are fabricated.

Ohio janitors strike over loss of hours and wage freeze

Janitors in Columbus, Ohio commenced a series of strikes September 24 against contractors for downtown office buildings claiming unfair labor practices charging managers with using threats and intimidation against workers. Four contractors, including ABM and Professional Maintenance, want to freeze janitors’ wages until 2015 and cut the full-time workforce from 70 percent to 15 percent.

Professional Maintenance is alleged to have cited the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act as the reason for the reduction of full time workers. Companies with more than 50 workers who log more than 30 hours a week—with 30 hours constituting full time status—will be required to provide health coverage.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents the striking workers and also backed Obama and his health care reform, has attempted to pressure downtown Columbus businesses to adjust the terms under which they subcontract cleaning services, and thereby make concessions. They have also lined up Democratic Party politicians to make empty gestures in favor of the strikers to create the illusion that mere pressure will alter the situation.

Vancouver bus workers ready to strike

Around 100 bus drivers and mechanics in West Vancouver could go on strike any day, after rejecting the employer’s final contract offer and voting almost unanimously for strike action last week.

The workers are members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) employed on the West Vancouver Blue Bus service. The deal that workers turned down is comparable to the contract signed earlier this year with other transit workers in the region but which provided no, or only minimal, wage gains. Union leaders have said that concession demands by the District of West Vancouver on work hours, holidays and other issues are provoking an unnecessary dispute.

Despite the strong mandate given by its membership, the ATU leadership appears intent on avoiding a strike while assuring the public that it will “do everything possible to not disrupt service.”





To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact