

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 December 2013

Latin America

Strikes in Argentine health and medical sectors

A number of limited job actions were carried out in Argentina's public health centers and hospitals last week. Shortages of proper equipment, inadequate infrastructure, delays in the payment of salaries and bonuses, and the government's refusal to promote temporary or "precarious" workers to full-time status were among the common issues.

Most of the striking medical workers are members of the State Employees Association (ATE), which is under the umbrella of the State Unions Front (Frente de Gremios Estatales). Stoppages of 24 and 48 hours took place in hospitals in Chubut, Neuquén, Buenos Aires and other provinces.

The Eva Perón Hospital of San Martín in Buenos Aires provides a stark example of the crisis in the Argentine health sector. Pregnant women have been turned away due to the lack of beds in the maternity room. Staff shortages in the pediatric and gynecological departments have led to periodic closures.

According to a *Contexto Nacional* report, "The walls are cracked. The stretchers, cut up and full of holes. There is no hot water. Over one of the stairs of the main hall one senses the odors of a sewer pipe that broke a few days before. Of four elevators, there are two that do not function. On the fourth floor...there are broken, piled-up beds, dirty tools and papers on the floor." Violence by frustrated and angered clients has increased, and doctors complain of the situation being "disappointing and depressing."

In many cases, subcontracted doctors have not received their salaries in five or six months. The budget is underfunded by about 30 percent, and staff shortages are acute. The doctors' unions are asking for meetings with their provincial governments, requests that so far have been ignored.

Chilean customs workers strike over salary raise

On November 25, workers at customs houses in Chile began a 72-hour strike to press their demand for a wage increase. The strike affected travel and transportation at border crossings, seaports and airports. The action was called by the National Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF) to press for salary demands.

The ANEF had originally demanded a wage increase of 8.8 percent, which they later lowered to 7.8 percent. The government's last proposal before the strike was 4.4 percent. The ANEF dropped its demand to 7 percent, but the government remained intransigent. The ANEF then extended the strike indefinitely.

In Arica, a coastal city in Chile's far north, at least 750 trucks

carrying products from Bolivia were delayed. Located about 100 miles from the landlocked nation's border, Arica is a major export site for its international container traffic, particularly foodstuffs and minerals.

Similar delays involving thousands of trucks were reported at border crossings with Bolivia and Argentina. The slowdowns brought demands from the La Paz Heavy Transport Departmental Chamber that the Chilean government install a mechanism for payment of economic damage caused by disruptions to the delivery of goods.

On November 30, the ANEF lifted the strike after accepting the government's offer of a 5 percent raise.

Colombian hospital workers strike for overdue pay

Workers at the San Sebastian Hospital in Piedras, Colombia, struck November 27 over longstanding pay demands. Currently, some of the workers have not been paid for three months, while others have gone four months without pay.

Nelsy Gómez, president of the Antoch Tolima health workers' union, pointed out that although the union and hospital management have reached agreements, they were not carried out. "They paid some and others they didn't; then the colleagues decided to strike and ask the mayor, Arquímedes Ávila Rondón, to find a solution." She added that the strike would not end until they arrive at a solution.

Mexican teachers return to work after 40 days on strike

Teachers in the National Education Workers Coordinator union (CNTE) in the Mexican state of Michoacán ended a 40-day strike November 27 at basic-level schools. At the same time, they vacated installations of the Education Secretariat (SEE) that they had occupied on October 16.

The teachers had struck to protest the imposition of educational reforms, which would threaten their living standards and labor rights, and impose an evaluation system that they have criticized as unjust.

The CNTE mentioned that "the Michoacán teachers will continue to participate in activities and mobilizations that are carried out at the national level," according to *Azteca Noticias*. "For that, it warned that they will abandon the classrooms in an intermittent manner, although with the commitment to add a half hour to the normal schedule to recuperate classes."

Striking Barbados water workers return to job as talks resume

Striking workers for the Barbados Water Authority (BWA) were called back to their duties November 27 by the Barbados Workers' Union (BWU) as BWU representatives met with the minister of labour and chief labour officer. The workers had walked off the job on the 21st due to disagreement over a wage

increase.

Although spokespeople for both the ministry and the union claimed to be making progress following nearly five hours of talks, they were vague on details, only stating that they agreed to meet again the next day. Minister of Labour Senator Dr. Esther Byer Suckoo told reporters, “What we have now is a commitment to negotiating” and that the return to work “is standard protocol and it has been agreed to.” She added that there would be no recriminations, but that “some of the matters are too detailed to actually be resolved tonight or even tomorrow morning.”

BWU general secretary Sir Roy Trotman said that some progress had been made, “but I think we have the framework for an agreement.” Trotman has advocated “restraint” in industrial actions and shown willingness to call off strikes before, as in the case with telecommunications giant LIME in January.

The United States

Connecticut hospital locks out workers after four-day strike

Nearly 800 nurses and health care technicians at Lawrence & Memorial Hospital in New London, Connecticut, were locked out November 30 after they attempted to return to work on the heels of a four-day strike over outsourcing of jobs. The striking workers, members of two locals of the American Federation of Teachers, are opposed to hospital management’s goal to transfer work to non-union locations and are demanding the right to follow the work to the new locations.

Most recently, the hospital had proposed job security for only 90 percent of the registered nurses (RNs) and 50 percent of the licensed practical nurses (LPNs). The hospital employs 540 RNs and 250 LPNs and technicians.

According to New London’s mayor, Lawrence & Memorial contacted the city months ago seeking rental space to house replacement nurses. Some 150 to 250 replacement workers are now performing the jobs of locked-out nurses. Further, management insists the lockout will be maintained until the union signs a contract. Negotiations were set to resume December 3.

Minnesota Black Friday protest leads to 26 arrests

Hundreds of protesters marched November 29 in St. Paul, Minnesota, to protest low wages and working conditions that persist at the nation’s largest retailers such as Walmart and Target. Some 26 participants blocked traffic and were arrested near St. Paul’s Midway shopping strip as a part of 1,500 protests slated to take place in major cities across the country.

In Minnesota, the event began with a strike by three workers at a suburban Walmart on the day before the beginning of the Thanksgiving Day holiday. Democratic congressman Keith Ellison was on hand to promote illusions in an increase in the national minimum wage.

Protesters also held demonstrations at a downtown Minneapolis Target store where CTUL, an organization supported by the Service Employees International Union, is attempting to organize the retailer’s janitors.

Canada

Shipyard walkout protests worker’s suicide

As many as 300 workers at the Irving Shipyard in Halifax, Nova Scotia, walked off the job last Thursday in a one-day protest over the suicide of Peter MacKenzie, a fellow worker whom they believe faced harassment by management that led to his death.

MacKenzie took his own life the day after receiving a month-long suspension without pay for what began as his questioning of safety inspections. A number of workers have expressed anger over what they see as a pattern of arbitrary disciplinary actions and firings of other workers by the company as it seeks to increase productivity and profitability.

The company says its own investigation found it had done nothing wrong and that workers who participated in the protest would be docked a day’s pay. Union leaders for Unifor, the newly amalgamated trade union giant that represents workers at the yard, have made it clear that they do not believe the company’s disciplinary actions are related to the suicide and have asked their members to return to work.

BC schools facing strike action

More than 1,000 teachers and staff at three school boards on the lower mainland of British Columbia last week delivered a 72-hour strike notice and could go on strike at any time.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been working without a contract since June 2012, and at least one of the three CUPE locals involved drew a unanimous strike vote from members. The union says that the school boards are all posting budget surpluses but are refusing to pass the savings on to workers by improvements to their “outdated” benefits plan. In addition, the employer group is demanding concessions in long-term disability and other benefits.



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