

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 December 2013

Argentine hospital workers hold 24-hour strike over security, supplies, salaries, working conditions

Workers in 78 hospitals in Buenos Aires province struck for one day December 12 to press their demands for greater security, improvements in salaries and working conditions, and the provision of adequate supplies and equipment. Shortages of personnel in neonatology, and obstetrics and gynecology are particularly acute.

The workers are represented by the Buenos Aires Province health professionals association, known as CICOP. "Only guards, and what there is of admissions, including intensive therapy, are attended to," CICOP president Dr. Patricia Guerrero told *El Debate*.

The question of security is also of concern to the hospital workers. Incidents of violence against personnel and patients have risen, bringing calls for more police and security guards at hospitals. Dr. Guerrero told *El Debate* that despite provincial government promises to post police at hospitals, "Presently the aggressions continue but they aren't in the hospital. There is some private security, but they can't do much, just observe, but the police part that we have gotten, it isn't much."

Regarding salary demands, the provincial Vice-Minister of Health declared, "Salary negotiations have their scope and that scope is the parity talks that will be set for the month of March."

CICOP has called for another 24-hour stoppage on December 18.

Mexican professors strike to demand payment of benefits

Educators at five campuses of the National Professional Education College (Conalep) in the state of Yucatan, Mexico began an indefinite strike on December 11. The professors struck to demand the overdue payment of 6.4 million pesos (US\$496,000) in benefits owed them.

Last year there was a national strike of Conalep teachers for the same reason: delays in the payment of the benefits, which "left them with the uncertainty of not knowing if the demanded pay would arrive this year," as reported in *yucatan.com.mx*. A meeting between administration and teacher representatives was scheduled for December 12.

Mexican teachers strike to protest nonpayment of wages to colleagues

Teachers in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico began a strike on the afternoon of December 13 to demand payments to interim teachers and retirees. The teachers are members of National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE) Section 37. SNTE section 37 called for all of its members, numbering about 17,000, to join the strike on Monday, December 16.

A Section 37 coordinator told reporters that the problem was inherited

from the previous administration, which did not pay the interim teachers at the end of their assignments. Some of the teachers have waited over a year and a half for their pay.

Retired teachers confronted the state governor, Francisco Vega De Lamadrid, at a public event on December 11, demanding that they get paid their end-of-year bonus. Vega promised them the payment by December 17.

Baja California SNTE Section 2, embracing about 33,000 teachers, declined to strike, saying that they were currently in negotiations over the same issues.

Health workers in Dominican Republic strike for payment of end-of-year "salary number 13"

On December 11, workers for the Dominican Social Security Institute (IDSS) began a strike to demand the payment of their sueldo número 13, or "salary number 13," a double paycheck. All the nation's hospitals, clinics and doctors offices were affected, with doctors, nurses, bioanalysts, dental surgeons, health technicians, psychologists, pharmacists and administrative personnel joining the walkout.

Doctors have specified that they will only attend to emergencies. On December 13, about 500 employees at a hospital in Santiago staged a protest in front of the central patio.

Workers in many Latin American countries depend on the end-of-year bonus, also called the aguinaldo, to cover extra expenses accrued during the holiday season. Delays and nonpayment have increased in recent years. Workers complain that they have increasingly been forced to resort to protests and strikes to get IDSS to deliver. One nurse told reporters, "They have told us that they'll hand over the double salary next Thursday, therefore we decided to remain in protest until that date arrives."

Jamaican tanker drivers strike over wages, benefits, pensions

Some 200 petroleum tanker drivers in Kingston and Montego Bay, Jamaica parked their trucks on December 12 to press for an increase in haulage rates as well as benefit and pension demands. The drivers are members of the National Workers Union (NWU).

The drivers' haulage rate dispute has been with petroleum marketing companies, who have refused to raise the rates from about 35 Jamaican cents per litre (about a third of one US cent) to 97 Jamaican cents (about one US cent) for hauling petroleum in the Corporate Area, as Greater Kingston is called.

NWU president Vincent Morrison criticized the uneven effects of privatization of the petroleum industry as a result of the Petroleum Act of 1979: "It's only the marketing companies that have been benefiting, the

gasoline retailers, the gas station attendants, the workers, the drivers having problems. Something will have to be done to cauterize the state of disorder in the industry.”

A “marathon meeting” between the NWU and the marketing companies ended shortly after midnight, December 14 with the production of a draft of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The draft MOU is being presented to the NWU membership this week.

No resolution in lockout of Pennsylvania utility workers

There has been no resolution to the three-week old lockout by the Pennsylvania electric company Penelec of nearly 150 utility workers, despite rumors of new talks last week. Penelec locked out workers in Shippensburg, Altoona, and Lewiston on November 25, after workers voted down the company’s “last, best and final offer,” which would end health care for current and future retirees in December 2014.

The company is also demanding an end to the old defined benefit pension plan and instead wants to substitute a “cash balance” plan. The Utility Workers Union of America Local 180, which represents the locked out workers, says that the company has refused to provide any details of the alternative pension plan and worries that the company will abuse the system.

Penelec is owned by the Fortune 500 company FirstEnergy, which has acquired energy companies in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey and New York. The company is currently bringing in replacement labor from its other operations to break the resistance of the Penelec workers.

Strike by Illinois county workers ends

About 1,000 workers for Will County, Illinois voted to end their 16-day strike December 5 after voting by a 96 percent margin to accept a new agreement that boosts pay but increases healthcare costs. Workers strongly opposed the county’s “last, best and final offer” last month, which imposes greater health care costs on workers that will in some cases result in doubled insurance payments.

Will County officials indicate they would not budge on the new health care costs that will be shouldered by workers. But in an effort to overcome rank and file resistance, county and union negotiators agreed to change the salary schedule by shifting workers ahead by two steps on the pay schedule.

Each pay step increases wages by 2.5 percent. When combined with a 4.5 percent cost of living increase, workers are given the impression of a 14.5 percent pay increase by the end of 2016. These increases would be eaten into by the new burden of higher health care costs.

Toronto sports stadium workers on strike

600 workers at the Air Canada Centre (ACC) in downtown Toronto went on strike last Friday after six months of negotiations failed to yield a contract and workers voted 82 percent against the last contract offer.

The Teamsters union represents the strikers, who include restaurant,

housekeeping and maintenance workers. Workers at nearby Real Sports and E11even restaurants are also affected by the strike. Main issues in the dispute include wages and work hours, with the union citing rollbacks and wage freezes as central to the impasse.

The arena is owned by Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE), who say that the strike will not affect upcoming events, including scheduled NFL games and a concert by Beyoncé.

Ontario Personal Support Workers (PSWs) on strike

PSWs employed by Red Cross Care Partners who provide in-home personal support to seniors across the Province of Ontario went on strike last Wednesday to fight for minimal travel expenses and a living wage.

The 4,500 workers, mostly female, who are represented by Service Employees International Union Healthcare (SEIU Healthcare), are paid about \$15 an hour and have not had a wage increase in over five years. They are also fighting to get fair compensation for travel costs that they are required to pay to visit clients—usually with their own vehicles.

Workers recently rejected an offer that would increase wages a mere 11 cents an hour. The union says that, taking inflation and rising fuel costs into account, earnings for PSWs have effectively been reduced by seven percent over the last two years.

B.C. municipal workers take job action

Over 500 inside and outside municipal workers in the city of Prince George in central British Columbia held a one-day strike on Saturday and continue a work-to-rule campaign after months of fruitless contract negotiations.

The workers involved in the dispute, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), overwhelmingly rejected the city’s final contract offer in late November, which included a wage freeze for the first two years of a new contract.

The strike was originally set to begin on Friday but was postponed until essential service provisions had been negotiated. The job action will affect a range of city services including garbage collection, snow-removal, and Civic Centre operations.



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