Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Argentine nurses strike, block roads for salary raise

Public health system hospital and clinic nurses in the Argentine city of Neuquén, capital of the province of the same name, voted in assembly December 26 to extend the strike that they had begun the week before. The nurses, members of the Neuquén Nurses Syndicate (SEN), walked out to press their salary demands. The strike was to remain in place until December 31.

The nurses have engaged in limited strikes, marches and road blockades off and on for nine months. Negotiations between SEN bargainers and hospital administration reps have repeatedly failed. The nurses demand a 31 percent increase for technical and auxiliary workers and 40 percent for licensed nurses. Nurse's aides and nurses would earn 6,892 pesos (US$1,051) and 7,514 pesos (US$1,146) respectively. Management has not substantially improved its offer.

On December 30, the nurses voted again to extend the strike 96 hours and at least 500 said they would quit if they did not get a new offer. The director of the Castro Rendón Hospital, the main facility in the area, sent out calls to retired hospital workers and recent nursing college graduates to work as scabs.

On December 31, SEN, joined by the ATE state employees union and the CTA labor confederation, called a march to the Government House.

Mexican cargo workers strike over unsafe workplace

About 200 night shift workers at the Estafeta parcel services airline in San Luis Potosí, Mexico struck on December 31 over concerns for the safety of the infrastructure. The walkout was in reaction to an accident in the early hours of December 29, when about 70 square meters (775 square feet) of the building's roof collapsed, killing one worker and injuring ten others.

Late on the night of December 30, a group of workers met with company directors to voice their fears that a similar incident could occur. Unconvinced by assurances that the State Civil Protection Agency had the area marked off and that the rest of the building was safe, the workers refused to go back to work. Representatives of the workers did agree to enter into talks.

Turmoil in Uruguayan hospital union over accusations of abuse of funds

On December 30, members of Uruguay's Clinical Hospital Workers Union (UTHC) held an assembly over allegations of abuse of funds by its directors. An audit of the union's finances between October and December revealed irregularities.

The majority of the accused officials are close to President José Mujica's Broad Front coalition, while the current leadership is aligned with the Popular Unity Current and the Colorado Party.

The meeting was scheduled for 9:30 a.m., but due to a low turnout was delayed until 10:00, when about 60 of the UTHC's 2,000 members were in attendance. This was below the 5 percent needed for a quorum, but the meeting proceeded just the same, prompting some attendees—who also claimed that nonmembers were present—to chant, "There's no quorum, it's disgraceful!" while others shouted back, "Thieves!" and "Delinquents!"

The charges brought against the former officials included "abusive and irresponsible uses of UTHC money, the submission of irregular receipts (without details, date, or source, with adulterated numbers and duplicated receipts) and, most important, there exists a discrepancy of 147,385 pesos [US$7,000] between revenues and expenditures," as reported in *El País* .

Speeches by both sides followed with one of the accused complaining that he had been judged for spending "only 500 pesos [US$23.70] for travel allowance per week," and noted that, "the previous Finance Committee never detected shortages."

A current official declared, "We are not here to bankroll vices, so that they can eat pizza, smoke, take taxis or suck up everybody's money."

The meeting ended with the expulsion of four members, the suspension of four and the demand that they pay back the money within a 10-day deadline. After the meeting adjourned, the sides traded insults and slaps. Two male nurses nearly came to blows before being separated by some women.

Antigua sanitation workers strike over unpaid wages

Sanitation workers in St. John's, capital of the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbuda, struck on January 3 over nonpayment of wages and long overdue overtime pay. About 700 workers are affected.

The sanitation workers' refusal to make their rounds surprised officials of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union, who belatedly

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declared their support for the action.

Government officials claim that the nonpayment of wages and overtime was not related to cash flow problems, but to an "administrative foul up."

Barbados teachers and other public workers criticize union inaction

About 300 teachers in Barbados converged on the headquarters of the Barbados Union of Teachers (BUT) in Bridgetown on January 3 following the news that some 3,000 public workers were set to be laid off in the near future. Union officials held a meeting with them, assuring them that the Ministers of Finance and Education had indicated that their jobs were safe.

According to *Nation News*, "The teachers escaped unscathed this time, but executive members of BUT said they were conscious that the situation could change at any time."

The island nation's Drainage Department has already laid off around 400 workers. Although National Union of Public Workers (NUPW) General Secretary Dennis Clarke called the layoffs "shabby, shameful and disgraceful," all he could offer as a strategy was to call for an emergency meeting with minister of the environment and Services Commission officials. So far, no date has been given for the meeting.

The Barbados trade union bureaucracies were subjected to criticism by Dr. George Belle, former dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill. In a January 1 speech, Belle accused the union tops of "adopting a neo-liberal "win-win" philosophy," as reported in the *Daily Na t i on* .

He also stated, "It is not surprising to me that Sir Roy [Trotman, head of the Barbados Workers' Union] has broken away from the Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations, it is not surprising to me that the Barbados Union of Teachers did not give the Barbados Secondary Teachers' Union (BSTU) any support, and it is not surprising to me that a set of trade unionists in Barbados are looking for all kinds of excuses not to defend the workers."

Lockout continues at California metal manufacturing plant

Some 100 workers remain locked out of the Silgan Containers Corporation plant in Modesto, California in a dispute over wages. The lockout began right before Christmas after the plant's management failed to obtain a two-year wage freeze from workers. Workers, represented by the Teamsters union, are holding out for a modest 1 percent wage increase.

"Silgan has taken and taken and taken from us," Robert Harrison told the *Modesto Bee*. "We need to take a hard-line stand to show them they can't continue to take away from us. We're trying to tell Silgan that we're not going backwards anymore."

Silgan has three plants in Modesto and another in Riverbank, all of which have separate union contracts. Workers at the other plants are estimated to receive wages of $2 an hour more than their locked-out counterparts.

Silgan is the largest manufacturer of metal containers in North America and its California plants are tied to the agriculture canning operations of the state. In 2013, it obtained record profits.

Union rejects Ottawa University Fellows membership

After an effective organizing campaign, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has inexplicably rejected application by Female Residence Fellows at Carleton University in Ottawa to join their union, leading to the resignation of three of the four student organizers.

No reason has been given by the union aside from one brief email which stated that the union did not believe a union was "the appropriate vehicle" to represent student interests. One possible reason that the CUPE national leadership intervened is that residence fellows are paid with free room and board, which presents a problem for the union in assessing dues collection.

The move, which came after a month of talks between the union and student organizers, has left the 31 residence fellows, who signed union cards in a bid to gain a collective voice with school administrators, prone to discrimination by their employer at the school. The 60 residence fellows at Carleton are full-time students who live in residence and manage issues and emergencies affecting first year students in residence.

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