

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 January 2014

Haitian teachers strike to demand back pay

Teachers in Haiti went on indefinite strike last week to demand months of back pay. Nonpayment of teachers has been a persistent problem in a nation devastated by natural disasters, cholera, imperialist invasion, corruption and inequality. Teachers have struck numerous times in 2012 and 2013 over back pay and other issues.

A communiqué from the National Union of Teachers' College Graduates of Haiti (UNNOH) dating back to January 18, 2013 listed some of the demands: "back pay, minimum living wage, legal status for the teaching profession, the education budget to rise to 34 percent of the national budget, decent working conditions, a union voice in social security policy, a real quality public school system, vaccination against cholera in all schools and colleges, one hot meal a day for all students and teachers, and measures to protect the environment."

The issues have not been addressed. Instead the crisis has been exacerbated by antiunion and pro-privatization policies advocated by US education "reformers" described in a teachersolidarity.com report: "School fees are abolished, class sizes increase exponentially, no new teachers are hired, there is no money for basic necessities and teachers and communities have to do their best to work in an impossible situation."

Guatemalan teachers protest for increased education budget, labor rights

Teachers from throughout Guatemala converged on the capital Guatemala City January 23 to demand that the government increase resources devoted to education and to respect educators' labor rights. The protest was called by two unions, the National Assembly of Teachers (ANM) and the Education Workers of Guatemala Union

(STEG).

One reason for the protest was the recent decision by the Congress to maintain education spending for 2014 at the 2013 level. Last year's education budget was 10.75 quetzals, or about US\$1.37 billion.

The protesters called for increasing funds for supplies and teaching materials, honoring the collective bargaining agreement and providing resources for school meals. One STEG official told reporters, "We don't want there to be schools without programs or students without food."

Guatemala is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Eighty percent of the population is below the poverty line, and 13 percent lives in extreme poverty. The richest 20 percent of the population accounts for more than 50 percent of the entire country's consumption. The Guatemalan Congress has rebuffed calls to increase the education budget and raise wages for education and health workers.

48-hour strike at Buenos Aires public hospitals over salary and security demands

Doctors and health workers at public hospitals in the Argentine city of Buenos Aires struck for 48 hours on January 21 and 22. The action took place a week after a one-day strike the medical workers, members of the Health Professionals of the Province of Buenos Aires Syndical Association (CICOP), held the previous week.

The most recent action was called as a protest against the lack of response to the workers' demands, which include the immediate opening of parity talks, a starting salary of 10,000 pesos (US\$1,395) for new-hire doctors and residents from January 1, 2014 and fulfillment of pending points from the 2013 contract.

An additional demand, according to a CICOP communiqué, is "an urgent interview with the governor [Daniel] Scoli and his ministers about the growing

violence and insecurity in hospitals and health centers, and needed attention to the conflicts in the municipal branch offices."

Chilean port workers union signs agreement to end three-week strike

On January 25, Sergio Vargas, a union spokesman for Chilean dockworkers, announced that the government, port operators and union directors had reached an agreement to end the strike that had begun January 3 over retroactive pay and other issues.

The strike had slowed or stopped exports of fruit and copper from terminals along the entire length of the nation. Business groups including port operators and fruit exporters had called for the government to intervene, and police had escorted scab workers in attempts to break through picket lines with limited success.

Not only management and the government opposed the strike. On January 18, Chile's truck drivers confederation urged the union to meet with government officials and port managers put an end to the strike.

Vargas told reporters that the main demand, the payment of retroactive lunch-break pay going as far back as 2005, would be met by a one-off payment.

Peruvian medical workers walk out over firings, equipment malfunctions

Doctors, nurses, technicians and administrative personnel at the Neoplastic Infirmitiés Regional Institute (IREN Norte) in the northwestern Peruvian city of Trujillo struck January 21. The strike was called by the Medical Corps (Cuerpo Médico) to denounce a series of irregularities and arbitrary firings.

One demand is for sufficient electricity for the radiology center, where equipment is functioning at partial capacity. Another is the construction of a new hospital to meet the needs of the regional population.

Finally, the Medical Corps is demanding that appointments of administrators be made by their qualifications and not as political favors. Specifically, it calls for the dismissal of the director, who has fired

workers without justification.

Some demonstrators attempted to meet with the Minister of Women, Ana Jara, but according to one report, she "snubbed them and escaped through the back door..."

Tennessee lockout enters fourth month

Workers at the Kellogg Company plant in Memphis, Tennessee have entered their fourth month of being locked out after refusing to accept a final offer from the cereal maker. Kellogg demanded workers accept "casual" new hires under a second tier that would deny pensions, insurance benefits and cut wages by \$6 an hour.

Kellogg initiated the lockout on October 22 of last year. One month later, the company announced it would slash its international workforce by 7 percent.

Local 252G of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union has sought to create illusions that an unfair labor practices charge filed with the National Labor Relations Board will serve as a rebuff to the company.

Nova Scotia school bus drivers set to strike

Around 400 bus drivers and maintenance staff at the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB) in and around Sackville, Nova Scotia went on strike this week after workers rejected a ratification vote on a proposed new contract.

A strike notice was issued by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents workers at CCRSB, after the School Board rejected a proposal for binding arbitration. The union had made a proposal to the board for greater job security, but that was rejected as "unrealistic".



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