

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 September 2014

Latin America

Honduran health workers protest lack of supplies

Doctors, nurses and other health workers in the Honduran public health system (IHSS) marched and held protest actions August 26 against the crisis in health care. Sixteen union organizations, part of a coalition called “Save the IHSS,” called the protest actions in the capital Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba and other cities. More than 200 health centers nationwide were affected.

The week before, nurses had announced that they would strike to address the crisis in the nation’s health care system. The president of the Nurses Association, Janeth Almendárez, told reporters: “The patients are saved through the work of God because in the hospitals there aren’t any syringes, there isn’t any alcohol, there’s no serum, there are neither gloves nor medications ... We’re working with our bare hands.”

One protest participant, Elmer Mayes, president of the Medical College of Honduras, said that the health care crisis threatens to worsen the health of Hondurans and even cause deaths. “In 2014 the health budget has run a deficit ...and we have had many crises in the system, and in 2015 with a cut-up budget it’s going to be worse for everyone.”

Almendárez denounced repeated violations of labor rights as well, and said that the government “put a gag on health workers because nobody can denounce” the situation. The minister of health, Yolani Batres, warned that the government “will not permit the Honduran people’s health to be utilized as an excuse to negotiate the salary claims of health workers,” and has put out a call to unemployed and retired health workers to register with the health ministry in anticipation of industrial action.

Colombian teachers strike against privatization and violence

Over 300,000 teachers throughout Colombia struck and held protest actions on August 27 to call for changes in government education policies and for an end to violence against education workers. The Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE) called the action.

Last May, teachers struck for a week over wages, health care and health insurance, as well as demands over the evaluation of teachers’ competency and the educational system’s exclusion of teachers in formulating policy. Other concerns were government privatization moves and violence against teachers.

According to a *teachersolidarity.com* report: “In the past 20 years 999 teachers have been killed, including 60 in the last four years. Paramilitary death squads are able to operate with impunity in the country because they are in close collaboration with people high up in the political establishment. They terrorize populations

and assassinate anyone perceived to be left wing. For this reason trade unionists, and in particular teacher trade unionists are in very real danger.”

The May strike ended when FECODE and the right-wing government of President Juan Manuel Santos came to an agreement that would supposedly address the demands. The August 27 strike was called to pressure the Santos administration to deliver on those promises.

FECODE vice-president Tarcisio Mora told *El País*: “If they don’t give us a good budget for basic education, it is going to be impossible to have an alternative for the future.” However, the daily newspaper noted, Mora “affirmed that in no manner is the strike organized for a change of government or because of the new minister Gina Parody.”

Parody has claimed that the government has held numerous meetings and complied with almost all of the agreements, and has pointed to increased funding for education in 2015. “However, the majority of the funding will go towards financing Universities and Icetex grants, which are scholarships for higher education students, leaving much of the basic infrastructure and lower level student assistance programs underfunded,” according to *colombiareports.com*.

Striking Peruvian mineworkers march to press wage demands

On August 27, more than 200 striking iron mineworkers at Shougang Hierro Perú marched to the Palace of Justice in the regional capital Ica to present their demands for the year 2014-2015. The mineworkers have been on strike since August 18.

The strikers, accompanied by their wives and spouses, marched through the city’s principal streets demanding better treatment and higher wages. Among their demands were a raise of 10 soles per day (US\$3.53)—Shougang is offering 8.50 (US\$3.00)—and better working conditions, including an ambulance, uniforms and lunch for workers. Other demands include a jar of milk per workday and sickness and burial insurance.

This is the third strike in the last twelve months at Hierro Perú, including a 30-day walkout last September.

Police attack striking Paraguayan teachers

Demanding a 10 percent raise in salaries and an increase in government investment in education, teachers throughout Paraguay began a two-day strike on August 27. Some 92,000 teachers nationwide would be covered by the wage rise.

The strike call follows the failure of negotiations between teachers’ unions and the ministries of education and labor. The unions’ demands included allotting of seven percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education, in addition to the wage demand. The education minister called the

teachers' demands "unviable" and said that striking teachers would be sanctioned.

On the first day of the walkout, thousands of teachers in the capital Asunción marched by the Treasury building to the Education Ministry, where they blockaded roads and denounced government corruption, the ruling class's privatization agenda, lack of supplies for education and inequality. On the second day, police armed with rubber bullets and batons attacked them as they marched. Journalists covering the protests were injured as well. Police arrested one teacher, who was later released to go to a hospital to have his injuries treated.

The teachers' strike coincided with a strike by doctors, who are demanding higher salaries and more funding for health services. Earlier in the week, students marched in support of the teachers' demands.

Jamaican credit union workers protest salaries

Workers at the Teachers Income Protector (TIP) Friendly Society in Kingston, Jamaica have held protests recently to demand higher wages from the board of directors. TIP, according to the *Jamaica Gleaner*, "is similar to a cooperative credit union and provides loans and other welfare services to teachers."

On August 29, the 67 workers, who are represented by the University and Allied Workers' Union (UAWU), held a protest against the four percent increase offered by the board. The UAWU called the offer unacceptable, considering the millions spent on the board every year. Protests will continue until the board responds favorably, says union VP Garfield Harvey.

The United States

Fairpoint imposes concessions on workers in New England

Fairpoint Communications declared an impasse August 27 in contract negotiations and has imposed a draconian contract against its 1,700 workers in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Initially, some members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) began picketing, but the labor bureaucracy has directed workers to remain on the job.

The unilaterally imposed contract allows the company to hire independent contractors to perform union work, eliminates medical retiree benefits for current workers, freezes the existing defined benefit plan, and will compel workers to pay 25 percent of health care premiums where before they paid nothing.

The leadership of the IBEW and CWA are not opposed to concessions. "We understand that we're at the top of the heap and need to make adjustments," said Pete McLaughlin, chairman of the IBEW's bargaining committee. McLaughlin said the union's most recent proposal would have saved the company \$200 million.

Fairpoint, based in North Carolina, purchased Verizon's land-based telecommunications operations for \$2.3 billion in 2007. It has posted net losses every year since then. In 2011, it declared bankruptcy.

Canada

Saskatchewan uranium miners locked out

Cameco Corporation locked out 535 workers at its operations in McArthur River mine and Key Lake mill in central Saskatchewan last Saturday after the United Steelworkers issued a strike notice for that day. The workers have been without a contract since last December.

The Saskatoon-based company, which is one of the world's largest uranium producers, has said it is shutting down operations at those facilities for safety reasons, but that the disruption will not affect its delivery commitments for this year.

Details of disputed issues have not been made public, but both sides had applied for conciliation in July. The price of uranium hit a two-year high after news broke of the work stoppage.

Ontario bus workers union pleads to avert strike

In a statement issued last week, leaders of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) union local appealed to parents and residents of the region near North Bay in central Ontario to pressure the school boards affected to avoid a strike.

Seven workers who plan and coordinate school bus routes in the region recently voted unanimously to strike, but the consortium representing their employer, the Nipissing-Parry Sound Student Transportation Services (NPSSTS), last week rejected their contract proposal, putting them in a strike/lockout position.

Union leaders say that, despite givebacks in their last contract, NPSSTS negotiators are trying to roll back contract provisions even further for this bargaining unit by selectively imposing terms from other school board contracts. Union leaders nevertheless say they are committed to achieving a new contract without service disruptions.



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