

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 January 2015

Latin America

Mexican hospital workers hold 24-hour strike over mismanagement, infrastructure, shortages.

Some 740 public hospital workers at the Oaxaca Regional High Specialty Hospital (HRAEO) held the latest in a number of 24-hour strikes on January 11. The striking workers, members of National Health Workers Syndicate (SNTSA) Section 96, walked out to demand the sacking of the hospital director, Carlos Arnoud Carreño, infrastructural improvements and more personnel and supplies.

Problems at the HRAEO have festered for a long time, and the SNTSA has appealed to various government officials to address the issues, but have been ignored or rebuffed. In a January 3 press conference, Section 96 head Fausto Martínez Morales accused the government of discrimination against the HRAEO as compared to similar hospitals and attributed Arnoud Carreño's appointment to his relationship with President Enrique Peña Nieto.

The SNTSA is calling for more construction, expansion and remodeling of HRAEO, but "they told us that they are lands in litigation and that they are communal.... The only solution is an expropriation decree on the part of the Presidency of the Republic"—i.e., the man who appointed Arnoud Carreño.

The union has called a number of one-day strikes before—for example, in July, October and December 2014—which failed to achieve any substantial results.

Guyana: Mineworkers renew strike over nonpayment of promised pay hike

Workers for the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) resumed a strike January 6 that they had suspended in December over the nonpayment of wage increases. The workers are members of the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU), which claimed 80 percent adherence to the action.

The GPSU and GGMC management had ended the December strike following the signing of an agreement, proposed by management, of an 8 percent interim increase while discussions continued on the 35 percent increase that the union had demanded. GPSU official Denis English told *iNews*, "The union gave one month and management stated that they endeavor to have everything resolved by December 31, 2014. To date the matter is still unresolved." He added that the agreement contained a specific timeline that GGMC had not followed.

Workers gathered outside the GGMC's Brickham office, carrying picket signs and chanting demands for the 35 percent increase. The GGMC released a statement calling the strike "illegal" and accused the GPSU of "bad faith."

Peruvian municipal workers protest mass firings

On January 1, the newly elected mayor of Lima, Peru, Luis Castañeda, took office. Castañeda, who had served two previous terms (2003-2010) as mayor of the capital city, was quick to show that his policies would be in line with the trajectory of official politics nationally.

The following Monday, January 5, close to 3,000 municipal employees, mostly women, came to their workplaces to find security guards barring

entry and telling them that they were no longer listed as workers. The firings were spread over a wide range of agencies, including taxation, security and transportation.

The outgoing administration of Susana Villarán had signed a contract to replace the one that expired December 31, as well as an extension of the old contract until January 31. The Castañeda government, however, claims that it is not bound by it.

The layoffs follow the December 8 passage nationally of—and subsequent massive protests against—the Youth Labor Law (YLL). Known in Peru as the Pulpin Law, the YLL, in the guise of providing jobs for young people, will further undercut workers' living standards as part of a program of austerity being carried out by both the Nationalist Party of President Ollanta Humala and the Popular Force party loyal to convicted former president Alberto Fujimori.

However, the firings are not a change, but are a continuation and intensification of the attack on city workers. On December 24, a group of municipal employees held a protest to denounce arbitrary firings by the Villarán administration.

The National Municipal Employees Union tried to arrange a meeting with municipal authorities, who refused after initially agreeing. Meanwhile, union head César Passalacqua told reporters that the municipality has already hired about 50 new workers who did not have to take competitive civil service exams.

A number of protests, both spontaneous and planned, have taken place since the firings. On January 8, when several hundred protesters converged on the Plaza Mayor, police in riot gear prevented them from getting near or into municipal government offices. Passalacqua noted that demonstrations have been met with government threats of more firings of women employees who are pregnant or lactating, and of handicapped employees. The union has filed a complaint with the Ministry of Women.

"Surprise strike" by Argentine bus drivers over unpaid year-end bonus

Drivers on at least six bus routes in Santiago del Estero, the capital of the northern Argentinian province of the same name, refused to work on January 8 to protest delays in payments of their year-end bonuses. The buses are owned and operated by the ERSA bus company, which has a history of delays in paying the bonus, called an *aguinaldo* in Spanish.

"This negligence on the part of the enterprise is something recurrent," reported *Nuevo Diario*. "Just last year seven similar strikes took place because management's excuses provoked delays in the payment of salaries." ERSA executives claimed that they did not receive government subsidies on time.

This time, however, figures published by the Argentine Transport Secretariat showed that ERSA has received at least 7 million pesos (US\$815,000) for January to cover monies owed to workers. The UTA transportation workers union stated that the strike would continue until the workers get paid.

Argentine lifeguards strike, march over working conditions, parity talks

Lifeguards in the Argentinian coastal resort town of Pinamar stopped work on January 10 to protest their working conditions and demand the initiation of salary parity talks. Around 220 lifeguards work on the

beaches of Pinamar, a favorite summer spot for vacationers on the Atlantic coast of Buenos Aires province. This summer has seen a record number of tourists at Pinamar's beaches, without significant increases in the number of lifeguards.

In a January 7 interview with the daily *Clarín*, Fernando Espinach, secretary general of the Pinamar Lifeguards Association (AGP), voiced some of the complaints and demands of the lifeguards. "Half of the Pinamar lifeguards depend on the municipality and the other half on the resort owners. Neither the state nor the private employers accede to the obligation that they have to negotiate parity talks."

The main issues over which the lifeguards struck were understaffing and the lack of essential equipment, such as lifeguard towers, ropes, neck braces, defibrillators and first-aid kits. Espinach noted that it takes about 15 minutes for a defibrillator-equipped ambulance to arrive on the scene, in situations where "the first four minutes are crucial."

The reopening of parity talks was another demand. "We workers have wanted to meet since the winter, but the city and the chamber of concessionaires don't want to sit down to dialogue," an AGP spokesman told *La Nación*.

The lifeguards assembled in the morning and marched to the local labor ministry office, where union delegates met with officials from the government and the Beach Concessionaires Association. By early afternoon, the union had signed an agreement that both the union and employers claimed would "give continuity to a series" of meetings to "advance solutions," after which the union called the lifeguards back to their posts.

Jamaican teachers protest delays in pay

Teachers at the Ruseas High School in Hanover, Jamaica, held a sit-in January 5 as a protest against delays in retroactive payments that were to have been owed since September 2014. Instead of going to class, the 93 teachers remained in the staff room as prefects and student councilors taught their classes.

The money owed is the result of a recalculation by Jamaica Teachers' Association (JTA) regarding payments going back to 2001-2008. Government authorities have blamed the delays in the payments on the transition to a new system that prevents schools from keeping money in their subvention accounts. They have provided little information on when the teachers can expect their pay.

According to a *Jamaica Gleaner* report, "The sum outstanding is approximately \$3.1 million [US\$27,000], and the teachers are not in the mood for talk. They are demanding action and a firm commitment from the ministry as to when the rest of the money will be paid over to them."

The United States

Transit strike threat at site of Super Bowl

The union representing transit bus drivers, fuelers and cleaners in Phoenix, Arizona, said it will call a strike if a contract settlement is not reached. The 300 drivers are employed by First Transit and operate some of the city's busiest routes.

The Amalgamated Transit Union and management completed three days of mediated negotiations last Thursday without reaching an agreement. Workers voted by a 96 percent margin last month to reject the company's "last and best" offer.

Negotiations are set to resume January 26, less than a week before the Super Bowl is to be held in the Phoenix suburb of Glendale. The strike could affect five bus lines in Glendale. The union is required to give 72 hours notice before a strike.

Under terms of its contract with the city, First Transit is required to

maintain 60 percent service in case of a walkout, presumably through the use of strikebreakers.

Strike by California Kaiser Permanente health care workers

Some 2,600 workers involved in mental health care walked out Monday at Kaiser Permanente facilities across the state of California. The walkout is protest of what workers call a "chronic failure" of the system to provide adequate mental health care services due to understaffing in violation of state and industry standards.

The strike involves workers at 35 locations across the state and is set to last five days. Mental health professionals, including psychologists, social workers and nurses and optical workers are members of the National Union of Healthcare Workers. (NUHW)

Management responded to the strike by saying that there is a national shortage of behavioral health specialists and that they have increased hiring.

The main demand by the union is for the establishment of a joint committee with management to discuss staffing levels. The NUHW, formed in 2009, has yet to reach a contract agreement with Kaiser. NUHW president Sal Rosselli said that union members were prepared to help patients if an emergency developed.

Canada

New Brunswick university workers set to strike

More than 50 office and administrative workers at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, are poised to go on strike after rejecting the employer's final contract offer last week.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and have been fighting for a first contract since 2010. While union leaders report that most contract language has been settled, there is still disagreement over issues such as job security, layoffs and severance, and the issue of work hours has remained in contention throughout the bargaining process.

It is now up to the university to return to negotiations, although 24-hours notice must still be given to initiate a strike or lockout.

Labrador town workers facing lockout

Municipal workers in the Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador, are facing a possible lockout this week after voting 96 percent in favor of strike action last week.

The workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are fighting against a two-tiered pension plan, which the employer is seeking to impose. CUPE negotiators say that, in addition, the defined benefit plan that has been tabled offers no real retirement security for workers.

At the same time, the mayor and Town Council recently voted themselves huge salary hikes that in most cases doubled their incomes.



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