# Workers Struggles: The Americas

**15 December 2015**

### Salvadoran health workers threaten strike over unpaid liabilities

Workers in El Salvador's Supportive Health Fund (Fosalud) agency threatened on December 10 to strike if they are not paid money owed them under this year's contract system. According to an elsalvador.com report, "For 2016, some 2,723 workers … will pass from the contract system to the law of salaries. This implies that at the beginning of the new year their liabilities will start to accumulate and they will receive them when they retire from the institution."

Sitrafos, the union for 850 Fosalud workers, had attended a meeting with management. The director of Fosalud, Verónica Villalba, told them that the agency does not have the money to pay the workers, having already spent it to equalize wages for employees making less than US$1,200. Villalba claimed that the agency is currently "looking for financing."

Sitrafos scheduled meetings with employees in the western and eastern zones to decide on what course of action to take next.

### Colombian doctors strike for overdue salaries

Doctors and nurses at Colombia's Services Providers Institutions (IPS) hospitals in the public hospital network in Barranquilla struck last week to demand the payment of their salaries for November. They also called for the reinstatement of their colleagues who were laid off in 2014.

The striking medical workers joined other IPS workers who already struck to demand overdue pay.

### Divisions among Paraguayan drivers unions over general strike call

A general strike call for December 21-22 by the Paraguayan Federation of Transport Workers (Fepatrat) was rejected last week by the leaders of the General Union of Transport Workers (UGTT), which claims the membership of eight transport workers unions. Directors of the eight unions made the decision December 10 "in repudiation of the directors who made workers lose their jobs promoting extreme measures," according to Aldo Snead, president of the Workers Unitary Central (CUT) during a general strike in November.

The UGTT claimed that the decision to call a general strike in November, which it called a "failure," was made behind closed doors by four union directors, and accused demonstrators of violence that was "out of place." Instead, they summoned President Horacio Cartes to respond to their demands. If Cartes does not, they say that they will call their own separate strike.

Cartes, who was elected with 45.8 percent of the vote in 2013, is a right-wing businessman who entered politics to counter the supposed "swing to the left" in Latin America. He was elected a little over a year after reformist president Fernando Lugo was impeached and removed from office by the Congress in hurried proceedings that were condemned by some Latin American governments and organizations—including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights—as a coup d'état.

Fepatrat secretary Juan Villalba denounced the UGTT as "businessmen," called the November strike successful and, claiming that the federation had the support of workers, students and peasants and "will be much bigger," said, "we don't need them to carry out our show of force."

### Teamsters accept federal mediation in Chicago Coca-Cola strike

The union representing workers at two Coca-Cola production and distribution facilities in the Chicago region accepted federal mediation December 8. Teamsters Local 727, which represents the 319 striking workers, and Coca-

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Cola Refreshments will hold their first meeting on December 14.

Coke workers voted by a lopsided margin to authorize strike action, and Local 727 filed charges of unfair labor practices and followed up quickly with a strike on December 3. Among the issues filed with the National Labor Relations Board, the union charges management with “intimidating employees in the workplace with baseball bats”.

The company responded with a letter calling the allegations “absurd” and initiated the call for federal mediation. It also denied that its proposed wage increase would be offset by increased health care costs.

Neither side has given detailed accounts of the issues that led to the strike. But the union did counter the recent claim of the company concerning health care costs by saying that some workers would suffer a doubling of the health care premium after five years under the new proposal. Other issues that have deadlocked negotiations are shift preferences, the grievance procedure, forced overtime without notification and a guaranteed 40-hour workweek.

**Mass arrests at Connecticut civil disobedience protest**

Police in New Haven, Connecticut arrested more than 120 Yale students, workers and other protesters December 12 in a rally aimed at calling attention to the city’s job crisis. The protest was organized by New Haven Rising and the union representing hospital workers at Yale New Haven Hospital.

Among the 300 protesters at the rally were members of Yale union Locals 34 and 35, the graduate students organizing union and Students Unite Now, an undergraduate student organization. An 18-year-old representing high school students addressed the crowd warning that the job crisis especially affected youth. Students “can’t wait to leave this city. They feel like they have nothing, like they are nothing.”

The rally in particular targeted Yale New Haven Hospital. Local 34 charges that 986 unionized jobs at the Yale School of Medicine are being slated for outsourcing by a subcontractor to Yale New Haven Hospital, whose workers are nonunion.

**Quebec public sector workers stage one-day strike**

Over 400,000 public-sector workers walked off the job December 9 across the province of Quebec in the latest action led by the Front commun, or Common Front, the union coalition formed to fight against government cuts and austerity measures.

This coincided with a three-day strike by 34,000 teachers in eight unions affiliated with the Fédération autonome de l’enseignement that started on the same day. The Common Front action was extremely limited and many of those involved were only off the job for a few hours, in some cases just minutes. Despite this, the union leadership and its political boosters hailed this as the largest strike in Quebec since 1972.

The Provincial Liberal government is demanding a two-year wage freeze with 3 percent increases in the remainder of a five-year contract while unions are looking for 4.5 percent annual increase in a four-year contract.

**Ottawa area slots workers facing lockout**

Some 124 workers employed at the Rideau Carleton Raceway Slots (RCRS) west of Ottawa could be locked out as early as this week by their employer, the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Commission (OLG), if they do not reach a deal by the deadline of December 16.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and are employed in a range of jobs including parking attendants, cashiers and clerks. They have not had a raise since 2008 and are fighting for wages comparable with those in similar jobs in the region, rates that OLG says are on the table. In addition to a fair wage, the union is seeking to protect workers’ pension plans in a new contract.

Management has threatened to deny health and dental benefits to workers in the case of a labor disruption, but their union has assured workers that they will provide those benefits in any case.

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