

Workers Struggles: the Americas

19 January 2016

Latin America

Panamanian nursing technicians strike for payment of promised raise

Nursing technicians in Panama's Social Security Fund (CSS) system struck nationwide January 14 to demand the immediate activation of a wage raise agreed upon between the Nursing Practitioners, Auxiliaries and Technicians Association (Anpate) and the Health Ministry (Minsa) on January 9.

Current monthly salaries for levels one and two nursing techs are US\$500 and US\$550, respectively. The new salaries would be US\$800 and US\$925. While Anpate reps continue to meet with their Minsa and CSS counterparts, the technicians have remained on strike and have carried out intermittent road blockages.

Other CSS unions have not called their members out in support of the technicians. A January 14 statement signed by laboratory, pharmaceutical, nursing and other health profession union officials declared, "We are in our posts offering services and fundamentally guaranteeing that our patients and the population in general who require our services receive their attention."

CSS issued a communiqué on January 16 saying that all its facilities were functioning "in a normal form."

Protests against sale of Colombian state-run energy generator

Workers for Colombia's state-owned energy generator, Isagen, protested outside the Bogotá stock exchange as well as across the country on January 13 to protest its sale to a private company. The protesting workers were joined by activists and opposition politicians.

The government of President Juan Manuel Santos sold its 57.6 percent share of Isagen, which provides about 16 percent of the nation's energy needs, to Canada-based Brookfield Asset Management for US\$1.99 billion. The consortium was able to pay the minimum price after the only other bidder, a Chilean firm, dropped out. Brookfield is expected to buy out as many of the remaining shareholders as it can once the deal is closed.

The sale went through despite legal challenges and opposition that included members of Santos's own party, and it took place while Congress was on recess. Adding to the controversy, the owner of the company representing Brookfield in Colombia is a personal friend of Santos.

Santos claimed that, with low oil prices drastically affecting the national budget, the money would be used to improve road infrastructure, a claim disputed by unions and tax justice activists. "Santos, don't sell what isn't yours," "Selling what is public is betrayal of the country," "Isagen is for everyone," and "Corrupt government!" were some of the slogans on signs

that protesters held.

24-hour work stoppage by Bolivian hospital workers to press contract, personnel, supply demands

Hospital professionals in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia's most populous city (1.5 million), stopped all work except emergency services on January 12 to press their demands. Consultations and nonemergency services were affected in 12 hospitals as well as at clinics.

The doctors are calling for the end of so-called eventual contracts, which are renewed each year and have no benefits. In addition, the doctors demand about "5,000 specialists to be able to run a good health system," as well as the same number of supplies and equipment, College of Medicine Vice President Wilfredo Anzoátegui told reporters.

The doctors' representatives had met with the president of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee on January 11. However, municipal authorities, with whom the reps had hoped to come to an agreement to avert the strike, did not show up. Anzoátegui said that if the authorities continued to ignore their demands, they would hold a 48-hour work stoppage to be followed by an indefinite strike.

Chilean copper mineworkers end strike after four days

About 700 copper mineworkers at the northern Chilean Cerro Colorado mine complex, owned by international mining giant BHP Billiton, downed their tools on January 11 after contract negotiations failed. The workers' union, the Cerro Colorado Workers Syndicate, called the walkout primarily over firings of workers and the company's miniscule offer of a 1 percent raise.

Another issue was the reinstatement of workers who had been recently fired for not maintaining production levels. Commercial production began in 1994, and according to *mining-technology.com*, "The mine is a significant producer of copper cathode for BHP, although production levels have declined in recent years as grades have declined."

On January 14, the union accepted a new contract offer and workers were called back to the job. The raise was upped to 2 percent, and Union Director Gustavo Tapia claimed that "we accomplished that the company desist in imposing the clauses that obliged the workers to realize a higher number of labors under the same conditions.

"In a negotiation, one obviously expects more and in this opportunity there's clearly a degree of dissatisfaction...but nothing was lost...and some improvements were gained," Tapia told *americaeconomica.com*, which reported that "one of the less favorable points was the reduction in the bonus for ending the conflict, that in this occasion rose to the equivalent of some US\$9,600."

Brief strike by Argentine airline pilots for salary raises

Airline pilots for LAN Airlines at Argentina's Jorge Newbery international airport near Buenos Aires held a "surprise strike" on January 14. Some 28 flights were canceled or rescheduled. At the Ezeiza airport, also on the Buenos Aires outskirts, some cancellations were reported as well.

The pilots' union, ALPA, called the strike to demand a raise to keep up with Argentina's inflation rate, officially at over 30 percent. According to a *Página/12* report, "The new government of President Mauricio Macri postponed the diffusion of the statistical data until his teams can make clear the figures, about which doubts had been raised in recent years."

Last week, the Argentine Aeronautic Personnel Federation, FAPA, announced that LAN Argentina had ratified their proposal of 27.5 percent.

Three hours after the walkout began, the Labor Ministry ordered the pilots to return to work while union reps attend "conciliatory arbitration" meetings. By noon, the pilots were back on the job and flights resumed.

Trinidad and Tobago: Gas platform construction workers strike over health and safety issues

Scores of workers for Trinidad Offshore Fabricator (TOFCO), which is constructing part of an offshore natural gas platform for British Petroleum Trinidad and Tobago (BPTT), walked off the job on January 14. The workers downed their tools to protest health and safety shortcomings at TOFCO's 37-acre La Brea Industrial Estate waterfront fabrication facility on Trinidad's southwest coast.

Workers gathered at La Brea to protest TOFCO's refusal to purchase personal protective equipment, correctly ground welding and other electrical devices, control sandblasting operations that contain carcinogenic silicon, and provide adequate lighting for night work. Clyde Charles, a member of the TOFCO Workers' Committee, told *Newsday* reporters of five welding shock incidents and of one worker who was hit and knocked unconscious by a pin that fell from a crane recently.

The next day, the striking workers were joined by unemployed La Brea residents who demanded that TOFCO hire more locals. South Western Division Task Force officers were deployed to the site, but no incidents were reported.

Energy Minister and La Brea MP Nicole Olivier has refused to intervene, calling the problems an "industrial relations issue" that should be settled through "peaceful discussion" between the workers and TOFCO. Workers ascribe her reluctance to funds she received from TOFCO and contracting companies to stage a beauty pageant and other events last year.

Last July, workers held strikes and protests at La Brea over health and safety problems at construction of the Juniper platform, which will be located 50 miles offshore. TOFCO responded by relocating construction of the platform's jacket and piles to Texas. Topside construction remained in La Brea.

The United States

Texas company declares bankruptcy in 16th month of lockout

Sherwin Alumina declared bankruptcy January 11 in the midst of a

dispute with 450 workers at their Gregory, Texas plant that has resulted in a 15-month lockout. The move followed December meetings with the United Steelworkers (USW) that failed to reach an agreement.

In a move full of portent for workers, Sherwin filed a plan to sell its operations to Corpus Christi Alumina. Both companies are owned by the Swiss-based multinational Glencore Company. USW official Ben Lilienfeld observed, "We are particularly concerned that the sale [to] an affiliate of Glencore subsidiary Commodity Funding LLC could be used as a means to sidestep its employee, retiree and pension obligations. If this is Glencore's intention, this would be a gross misuse of the bankruptcy process."

But the move could not have come as a surprise to the USW bureaucracy. Lilienfeld acknowledged the financial difficulties of the company and indicated the USW would take an active role in the bankruptcy.

The price of alumina (aluminum oxide) has fallen from \$350 per metric ton in October 2014 to \$236 as of November 2015—a price the company declared was "well below our cost of production." The collapse is attributed to a fall in demand and an oversupply of alumina from China.

Steelworkers union seeks to use pending NLRB decision to end Ohio lockout

The United Steelworkers and ANH Refractories of Oak Hill, Ohio were to have met January 11 to negotiate an end to a nine-month lockout. While neither side has revealed whether a meeting took place or what might have transpired, the possibility of an agreement followed a January 6 release by the USW that without a settlement the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) will issue a complaint against the company for regressive bargaining and an illegal lockout.

In the release, the USW revealed that absent an agreement, "the company would then face back pay liability to all workers for the time period the NLRB determines they were illegally locked out." The back pay would date from May 14, the date the NLRB has determined regressive bargaining began.

ANH locked out workers after they refused to accept concessions on benefits. According to the USW, the company revealed during one day of talks that they were worth \$550 million but wanted to become a billion-dollar operation. The USW clearly sees an opportunity to use the back pay issue as a negotiating chip to make concessions that will help protect the company's profitability and demonstrate their usefulness to management.

Canada

Nova Scotia newspaper workers facing lockout

Sixty-one workers at the *Chronicle Herald* newspaper in Halifax, Nova Scotia could be locked out as early as this week after their employer filed notice and workers voted almost unanimously for strike action last week.

A spokesperson for the Halifax Typographical Union says that management is forcing a confrontation with the intention of laying off up to one-third of existing staff that includes reporters, photographers, technicians and other staff. Reports have also emerged that the *Herald* has been asking freelance journalists to work as scabs in the event of a lockout or strike.

Conciliated talks with a government negotiator failed to resolve outstanding issues that include wages, pensions, work hours and a demand

by the employer that reporters to do their own photography. If a lockout takes place, it would be the second time in a year for the newspaper, which is the largest independent daily in the country.

BC transit workers set to strike

Around 90 transit workers employed by PW Transit Canada Ltd., which serves the coastal region of British Columbia north of Vancouver that includes the popular ski area of Whistler, could strike as early as Saturday after talks broke down last week.

Workers affected include bus drivers, mechanics and maintenance workers who are represented by union giant Unifor. Two days of mediated talks failed to produce an agreement with outstanding issues including vacation time, pensions, work scheduling and wages.

New Brunswick transit workers ready strike action

Bus drivers and other transit workers employed by the provincial capital of Fredericton, New Brunswick could go on strike this week after soundly rejecting a contract offer from the city.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) who implemented strike training last week in preparation for the required 24-hours notice, which they could submit at anytime. At the same time, the city has not ruled out locking workers out.

The union says that drivers, who earn around \$22 an hour, are paid at least \$2 an hour less than their counterparts in neighboring cities and negotiations have failed to close that gap. In addition, the union is fighting to have part-time drivers paid the same as full-time drivers. The city's offer was for only 1.75 percent annual wage increase in a three-year contract, a deal that the mayor insists won't be improved.



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