

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 November 2016

## **Mexican hospital workers strike for overdue pay**

Some 20,000 public health sector workers—doctors, nurses and support staff—in the Mexican state of Veracruz went on strike November 16 after the state government announced that it would not issue paychecks for the first quincena (15-day period) of November.

The SNTSS state health workers union also denounced the Health Secretariat's failure to deliver on a promised retroactive 5.1 percent hike, the lack of uniforms and chronic shortages of supplies, medicine and equipment.

The health workers resolved to provide emergency services to victims of accidents and gun violence, women about to give birth and other people “in a grave state,” a source at the Veracruz Regional Hospital told reporters. Some 59 hospitals and 234 health centers have been affected, and workers at orphanages, childcare facilities and the “Social Reinsertion” prisoner and ex-convict service agency joined the stoppage.

In the midst of the nationwide crisis afflicting all of Mexico, Veracruz has suffered additional fiscal hits from the scandal- and violence-ridden administration of PRI Governor Javier Duarte de Ochoa, who flew the coop following his resignation in October, leaving the government with debts of 87 billion pesos (US\$4.27 billion). He is still at large.

## **Brazilian police, demonstrators clash at anti-austerity protest**

Hundreds of military police were sent by Brazil's federal government to the state of Rio de Janeiro November 16 to back up local and state cops at demonstrations protesting a number of austerity bills being considered by the state legislature. The proposed measures—which include the slashing of public workers' salaries, cuts in social services and subsidies for the poor, increasing deductions from pensions, and hikes in transportation and utility bills—are aimed at making the Brazilian working class bear the brunt of the economic crisis that has engulfed the nation. Already, thousands of public workers have not been paid or have been paid months late.

The economic crisis has hit Rio de Janeiro particularly hard because of its squandering of public funds on sports-related construction projects, which were characterized by evictions of poor people, cost overruns, corruption, labor conflicts and the deaths of some workers. The federal government, fearing an

avalanche of requests for help from other states, has refused to continue to bail out Rio de Janeiro's state economy.

At least 2,000 protesters marched in the eponymous capital city to the legislative building, where they carried signs, blew whistles, chanted and marched to a session of the state legislature. Once they had broken down two metal barricades at the entrance, heavily armed and armored police attempted to drive them back with stun grenades and teargas, to little avail.

Later, armored vehicles with water cannons and riot police on horseback were sent in as reinforcements to the screams of “Cowards!” by angry protesters, who included teachers, firefighters and other public service workers. At least three people were injured, and two riot cops reportedly switched sides and joined the protesters.

## **National strike by Peruvian health workers for increased budget, wages, supplies**

Workers in Peru's National Health Sector Workers Unified Federation (FENUTSSA) began an indefinite national strike on November 16. FENUTSSA claims that adherence to the strike has been “overwhelming.”

The main demand is for a larger budget for the public health sector, which has suffered from chronic shortages of medicines and supplies, making it difficult to serve patients' needs. In addition, many workers are not classified as full-time and permanent, leaving them with no job security and benefits and earnings that are often below the minimum wage. Moreover, workers complain of rampant corruption in the sector, siphoning already inadequate funds.

On November 17, about 300 protesters held a sit-in protest in front of the Superior Court of Justice in Arequipa for about a half-hour, then marched to the Plaza de Armas, blocking downtown traffic. Workers said that after 25 years of being “relegated,” they are not going to return to their jobs until they have been heard.

## **Chilean public workers union ends nearly month-long strike**

After over three weeks on strike, the negotiating team for Chile's National Association of Public Employees called off a strike begun in late October to press their salary demands. The

walkout involved 15 different labor organizations embracing workers in the public health, civil registry, public sanitation and other sectors. The negotiating committee had originally countered the government's proposal of a 2.9 percent raise to begin in December with their demand for 7 percent. The government raised the offer to a trifling 3.2 percent, which one union official declared, "In real terms, that's a 0.2 percent (increase), which is the weakest in years." He added, "It's not fair, it's not appropriate." However, the union bargainers eventually whittled their proposal down to 4 percent.

The government of "center-left" President Michelle Bachelet refused to budge in the face of the strike and protest actions, against which police used water cannons and other repressive means. Doctors, who were not involved in the strike, held a march and demonstration November 16 in support of the striking workers, while at the same time calling for "dialogue."

On November 18, the negotiating committee called off the strike following approval by Congress of the 3.2 percent raise. An EFE report concluded, "To mark the end of the mobilization, hundreds of government workers gathered outside the presidential palace for a raucous protest."

### **Chilean home center workers strike over pay demand**

Around 8,700 workers for Homecenter Sodimac, the Chile-based home improvement warehouse chain, walked off the job indefinitely November 9 to press their salary demands. The home center workers' union is demanding a 7 percent raise and a bonus of 500,000 pesos (US\$734), while the company offers 3.5 percent and 150,000 (US\$220). The union stated that "the enterprise is making a definitive proposal; this signifies that it will not continue negotiating and that it expects that the 15-day strike deadline will pass so that the workers will start to be disunited."

There is some public support for the striking workers, typified by a November 16 solidarity march by about 300 public sector workers, themselves on strike at the time (see above). The slogan of the march was "The system affects everybody, public and private."

Sodimac has since offered a 5 percent increase to the base salary, but that "is far from what workers are seeking, which includes a salary increase of a fixed amount added to the base remuneration of each worker, independent of their position or seniority," reported *La Prensa Austral*.

### **Massachusetts contract over outsourcing dispute ends with ratification**

Some 60 workers at the Aubuchon Hardware distribution center in Westminister, Massachusetts ratified a new three-year agreement November 18 after a two-week labor dispute over contract

language that threatened outsourcing. The new agreement, according to the company, allows the "flexibility to make the best decisions for our business."

Shannon George, head of Teamsters Local 170, would only go so far as to say that jobs are "protected to some extent" and that some outsourcing language remains in the contract. But, George conceded, "It depends on how far the company is willing to go," indicating the compromise is entirely in the company's favor.

The contract expired November 6 with management and the Teamsters arguing about whether the stoppage was a strike by the union or a lockout by the company. The dispute centered on contract language that determines how Aubuchon distributes goods to over 110 of its stores throughout New England and upstate New York.

The company contemplated closing the Westminister distribution center back in 2014 before implementing cost-saving measures. The company is the largest employer in Westminister and many of its stores operate in rural areas or away from major metropolitan areas. Canada

### **Toronto area garbage collectors strike**

Around 140 workers employed by private contractor Emterra Environmental in the Peel region adjacent to Toronto were on strike for two days last week before a tentative deal was struck with their union, the Laborers' International Union of North America, (LiUNA).

Emterra had given the union until midnight last Wednesday to accept their final offer, but that was soundly rejected by the membership. Union negotiators then extended an invitation to the company to resume talks and received no reply. That precipitated a strike on Thursday and on Friday afternoon Peel Region announced that an agreement had been reached and that garbage collection would resume immediately.

The strike affected 150,000 homes in the largely suburban region, during which residents were told to put their garbage out as usual during the strike even if it was not collected. The main issues that gave rise to the strike centered on wages, pensions and benefits, although no details were released about the tentative settlement.



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