Paraguay medical doctors strike; Strike vote pending for 7,000 Alberta grocery workers

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature

Latin America

Paraguay medical doctors strike

A five-day strike by government-employed doctors ended on Friday, August 28 in Paraguay with no settlement, triggering massive resignations.

The protest strikes, led by the National Medical Workers Strike (Sinamed) began the previous Monday with marches and rallies across Paraguay. At issue are wages, which have not been updated since 2012, increases in hospital supplies, the hiring of 9000 temporary doctors and improvements in working conditions.

On Friday, striking medical doctors rallied in the southern city of Itapua, one of the sites of the World Racing Rally Championship. In Asuncion, the country's capital, striking doctors blocked avenues in the city, with the support of medical students.

At the Acosta Ñu Hospital, one of the main pediatric hospitals in Paraguay, 141 of the striking doctors, out of 164, resigned, including specialists in intensive care, anesthesiology and plastic surgery.

More strikes and protests are planned for this week.

General strike in Iquitos, Peru demands clean water, an end to shortages and a halt to rising food and fuel costs

On Thursday, August 27, workers in the city of Iquitos, Peru's largest city in its Amazonian region carried out a general strike for 48 hours with 95 percent participation, shutting down government offices, schools, businesses, urban transportation and river transportation. The strike followed three weeks of protests in Ucayali, a region south of Iquitos, with a population of 600,000.

The protest strike was organized and led by transportation workers. At issue is the rising cost of living, caused by food and fuel shortages, and the lack of water that is safe to drink.

The strikers are denouncing broken promises made by right-wing president Keiko Fujimori to all those "Peruvians that have been forgotten" and that are being ignored. They are demanding that Fujimori travel to this region, negotiate with them and carry out her promises on environmental concerns. If that doesn't happen, the workers are promising a general strike of indefinite duration and the blockage of roads and rivers in the region.

A key issue in the strike was clean drinking water. Its main source for this city of half a million people is the Nanay River, which is being poisoned with mercury by illegal mining.

United States

Minnesota hospice nurses vote unanimously for seven-day strike over substandard wages and oppressive work schedules

The union representing 60 hospice nurses who work for Allina Health across the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metro region in Minnesota announced August 24 the workers had voted unanimously to authorize a seven-day strike as they fight for increased pay and an end to "long, irregular hours." The move by members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) comes after more than a year of negotiations that, according to the union, bogged down last winter and did not improve after a one-day strike back in July.

"Hospice nursing will always include long, heavy and emotionally draining days," said Allina nurse Amy Rich who also serves on the union's bargaining team. "Our nurses are regularly performing that work 10+ hours a day but receive only their base salary. Our nurses don't get flexibility in their schedules, or additional pay when we work holidays."

Besides wages and scheduling, nurses cite problems with understaffing and caseloads. No strike date has been set by the SEIU. State law requires that before any walkout by nurses the union would have to give a 10-day strike notice.

Weighing down on negotiations is a proposal by California-based Sutter Health to acquire Allina which is currently under review by the Minnesota office of the Attorney General. Such negotiations are generally a cover for a drive to slash public health services and impose even greater burdens on healthcare workers in order to enrich private investors.

Electrical workers in Eastern Oregon strike utility over terminations

Workers for the Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC) went on an unfair labor practices strike to oppose disciplinary action by management that has resulted in the firing of two veteran workers. While the 40 striking members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 125 are in a struggle over wages with OTEC, they are mainly contesting a new policy unveiled by management that forces workers to report to work outside their contract-designated schedules even when they are not on standby.

"Some of us have basically been forced to have our phone on us at all times during the week, even when we are not on standby," said Nick Simons, a journeyman lineman.

By ignoring the standby provision, the company can avoid compensating workers for making themselves available under this safety standard should there be an emergency. And workers who find themselves unable to report to work risk discipline including termination.

The evisceration of this provision has broader implications for the future of OTEC. Currently, the company provides services to 60,000 residents across Oregon's Baker, Grant, Harney and Union counties. But the company is aiming to expand its coverage to Malheur County through a $154 million acquisition from Idaho Power.

OTEC's determination to gut safety is revealed by its contracting with Minnesota-based Strom Engineering Corporation. Strom touts itself as a provider of "strike staffing services" across a variety of industries. It is paying strike breakers $90 an hour along with a $168 per diem to cover hotel and food for each worker. The compensation is double that of the striking workers.

Pennsylvania truck drivers supplying hospitals strike over wages and benefits

Truck drivers who transport cryogenic nitrogen to hospitals out of a Nippon Sanso Matheson facility in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, went on strike August 27 seeking improved wages and healthcare benefits. The contract covering members of Teamsters Local 30 expired at the end of June and negotiations commenced in April.

Johnny Higgins, a union steward with Local 30 told CBS News, "We feel like we haven't got a cost-of-living raise here… Bargaining has stalled. We're out here because of that."

Nippon Sanso Matheson Gas employs over 800 workers in North America and has over 160 retail locations similar to Greensburg across the United States. Nippon Sanso Holdings Group is a global corporation comprised of 300 companies that provide industrial gas solutions with some 20,000 employees in Japan, the United States, Europe and Asia.

Canada

Strike vote pending for 7,000 Alberta grocery workers

More than 7,000 workers, employees of the giant Safeway/Sobey's grocery store network across Alberta, are set to vote on a strike in the face of significant concession demands from Safeway/Sobey's management. The workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), voted overwhelmingly to organize a strike vote this past June. However, the UFCW leadership has only just begun to organize the vote for later this month.

Company management is demanding that any new contract rolls back benefits packages, freezes wages and closes some operations.

Mediation over the summer did not produce any changes in the bargaining position of the company. Union officials have told workers that a strike mandate is meant to refocus management in a new round of negotiations slated for mid-September. If a new contract is not agreed upon, then it is possible that a strike across the network could begin by mid-October.