

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 October 2012

## Guatemalan doctors strike over delayed pay

More than 150 doctors at the National Occidental Hospital (HNO) in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala went on strike October 18 over unpaid salaries and bonuses. The hospital had averted a previous strike threat by delivering payments from January to June, but failed to keep its promise to pay salaries and bonuses from July to the present by October 17.

Though the doctors stopped their consultations and walk-ins, they still attended to emergency cases. The amount owed to them, according to doctors' representative Emilio Bucaro, comes to over 1,500,000 quetzals (USD191,500).

A spokesperson for the HNO claimed that the nonpayment was the result of an error by an administrative staff member who deposited the money in the wrong bank. She accused the doctors of carrying out "a labor action against a worker" and said that the process of transferring the funds was underway.

A representative of the doctors, however, told *Prensa Libre*, "They tell us a lot and in the end there are no actions from the authorities to make the respective payments." The doctors extended the strike to Friday, October 19.

## Panamanian demonstrators battle police during free trade zone law protest

Protests erupted October 19 in the Panamanian city of Colon shortly after the nation's National Assembly passed Bill 529, which allows for the sale of land in the Colon Free Zone (CFZ). Police used tear gas and fired into the air as hundreds of protesters threw objects at them, burned tires and set up barricades in the streets. Police sources have been tight-lipped, but *La Estrella* reported, "Unofficial sources talk of one death, a dozen wounded, among them a 15-year-old." Three police officers were wounded.

The paper added, "Also, there were reports of shots against police units from balconies of 15th and 16th Streets in Colon." The mayor declared a 7:00 p.m. curfew.

The CFZ, located at the Caribbean entrance of the Panama Canal, is the largest duty-free zone in the Americas and the second largest in the world. It houses 2,000 businesses and employs about 30,000 workers. The CFZ, since its establishment in 1948, has been state-owned, renting sites to vendors, and has "not very onerous business requirements," according to the Business Panama web site.

Right-wing President Roberto Martinelli lobbied hard for Bill 529, claiming that it would be good for the province of Colon, and that opposition to the law was for "purely political" reasons instigated by people "who do not love their country."

According to an *AP* report, "Protesters said the land is already being rented and it makes no sense to sell it. They said the government should instead raise the rent and invest the money in Colon, a poor and violent city." Others expressed fears of job insecurity once properties become privatized.

## Dominican Republic: Protesters clash with police after 24-hour strike against fiscal "reforms"

A one-day strike October 16 against fiscal changes announced by the government of the Dominican Republic was followed by violent confrontations between protesters and police in the central city of Bona, the capital of Monseñor Nouel province. Protest actions also took place in ten surrounding communities.

The strike was called by various social organizations to protest a fiscal reform package proposed by newly elected president Danilo Medina. The package consists of a number of deficit reduction measures that will fall most heavily on the working class and poor, such as expansion of the value-added tax, tax hikes on fuel, auto license plates, telecommunications, cable TV, alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages and cigarettes.

In addition, it will apply a "Small Employers Tax Scheme" or self-employment tax to workers in the informal sector and lower or eliminate some subsidies such as electricity.

The strike's purpose was not confined to the fiscal package, however. Residents also demonstrated for an end to power blackouts, the opening of businesses in the free zone, improvement of the drainage system and repairs of barrio streets and connecting highways. Previous pleas to the provincial governor have received no response.

Marchers congregated in the downtown area, and as evening approached, SWAT teams arrived to patrol the city. In some sectors of the city, demonstrators barricaded streets with burning tires, tree trunks and trash. The only injury that was reported was a police sergeant who was hit by some buckshot and hospitalized.

## Trinidadian medical ancillary workers protest deplorable conditions, privatization

Some 75 ancillary workers at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex (EWMSC) staged a sit-in protest October 17 against poor working conditions and the Health Ministry's introduction of a "Public Private Initiative" that they fear would result in job losses.

The workers assembled in the main lobby at 2:00 and peacefully demonstrating, singing solidarity songs. "But less than 45 minutes later," reported the *Trinidad Express*, "members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service swooped down on them and asked that they desist as they were obstructing patients" an assertion that the employees' union, the Public Services Association (PSA), denies.

The protests were directed at the nonresponse of management to several festering issues. Requests for meetings over management's failure to improve working conditions as well as update their National Insurance contributions have been delayed and ignored. Other workers—who requested anonymity—expressed their disgust with the shabby treatment that they receive in the workplace.

One worker told the *Express*, "If they want to fix anything, they need to fix the way they manage... because now that we come out to

express our frustration, they quick to say privatise," and noting that cleaning services at the hospital were already privatized, he added, "the toilets are dirty, and you never have hand sanitiser or toilet paper."

The sit-in followed two weeks of industrial actions including sick-outs and demonstrations. Health Minister Dr. Fuad Khan, although he still supports the initiative, which he claims would improve efficiency, put the plan on hold after the sit-in.

### **Trinidadian research workers protest hazardous conditions, wage offer**

Workers at the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI) protested outside their workplace at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad October 18.

The workers have recently complained of eye and skin irritations and other illnesses. They suspect that the proximity of a mushroom house and a petroleum-testing lab may be the cause, but management has not responded adequately to requests that the concerns be addressed.

Management's response to a written request by Gerald Herreira, Branch President of the Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union at CARIRI, to address the issue was to claim that they could not talk about it until November 1. Herreira has asked Minister of Planning and Sustainable Development Bhoew Tewarie to investigate the matter.

Another bone of contention is management's recent offer of a derisory 3 percent raise for the 2008-2010 period. The union has brought the issue before the Industrial Court.

Herreira told cntworld.com: "We have to wait on adjustments in salaries. We have to wait on you to make safe working conditions. We have to wait on everything. We are just fed up. We have had it. Normally these workers are quiet people and they decided that enough is enough."

### **Peruvian doctors lift month-long strike over conditions and pay**

The Medical Federation of Peru (FMP), whose members work in Peru's Health Ministry (Minsa) hospitals, announced October 20 that it was lifting the strike it had launched September 18. The announcement followed intense negotiations with Minsa authorities after several previous meetings had broken down.

The 14,000 doctors struck to demand a "financial rescue" of national hospitals by the government of Ollanta Humala because they found themselves in crisis owing to the lack of resources and equipment. They also demanded raises that corresponded to the work that they do.

FMP president Cesar Palomino told reporters that they were giving the government "a respite" (*tregua*) on the condition of "complying with some accords proposed by the Health Minister," Midori de Habich. Among the proposals agreed on are: a 3,500 soles (USD1,351) bonus paid in May and December; a salary increase beginning in December; the appointment of all the doctors that work for Minsa until the end of 2013; extra pay for doctors who work in remote and less developed regions.

Habich told reporters that if Minsa did not get a "satisfactory response" from the doctors over the definitive lifting of the strike, "we will proceed unflinchingly with the docking (of wages)." Nonetheless, Palomino pointed out that FMP will evaluate the government's compliance in the next few months, and if it failed, the strike "would have to be reinitiated."

### **Federal judge bars strike action by airport workers in defense of victimized worker**

A US district court judge has barred non-union workers at Aircraft Service International Group from taking strike action in defense of a co-worker who was suspended for advocating improved safety conditions at Sea-Tac airport, which services the Seattle-Tacoma area. Judge James Robart ruled that ASIG (Aircraft Service International Group) workers come under the Rail Labor Act and are barred from launching an immediate strike.

ASIG workers fuel 75 percent of the planes flying in and out of Sea-Tac. Robart declared that failure to subject ASIG workers to the Rail Labor Act's restrictions on workers "would lead to an absurd result."

Some 100 workers have stepped forward to become "John Does" in a court filing in defense of Alex Popescu. Popescu, who works for ASIG was suspended after an altercation with supervisors over safety issues. Working Washington, an organization affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, said it would abide by the judge's ruling but continue to raise safety issues.

### **Machinists on strike against Bombardier Learjet in Kansas**

Machinists at the Bombardier Learjet plant in Wichita, Kansas have been on strike since October 8 over healthcare and other issues. The 825 workers voted by a 79 percent margin to reject the company's 5-year contract proposal that has increases in health care premiums and freezes wages in the first year followed by a one-percent increase in each of the remaining four years of the agreement.

Bob Wood, a spokesman for the International Association of Machinists, attempted to inject nationalism into the strike by declaring, "This is a Canadian company and we think they just don't get it." Some 1,100 Wichita workers last struck the company back in October of 2006. Learjet is a manufacturer of business jets for both civilian and military use.

### **Hotel workers strike in Quebec**

One-hundred-eighty workers at the Hôtel des Seigneurs outside of Montreal, Quebec, went on strike last weekend over a range of issues and after being without a contract since July of this year.

The strikers include cooks and cleaning staff, among others, who are members of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, (CSN). The workers voted earlier this month overwhelmingly in favor of strike action to gain parity with workers at 22 other hotels where contracts were recently negotiated.

Among their demands is a wage increase of 60 cents an hour for workers making less than \$16 an hour. Other issues in dispute include benefits and minimum guarantees for work shifts. Like other hotels, the Hôtel des Seigneurs has reduced room-cleaning service claiming environmental concerns, but which more meaningfully cuts costs and deprives cleaners of stable minimum incomes.

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