

Workers Struggles, the Americas

15 October 2013

Latin America

Mexican health workers strike for inclusion in social security system

Unionized workers for the Health Secretariat in the Mexican state of Michoacan began a partial strike at seven hospitals, as well as clinics and health centers, October 1 to demand that they be added to the social security system. In addition, striking workers picketed the state headquarters of the social security ministry (SSM). About 4,500 medical, paramedical, and administrative employees work at the state's hospitals.

Emergency services remained in effect. Unions and ministry officials remained in negotiations during the strike, while administrators called the strike "illegal" and threatened to bring legal action against the striking workers.

On October 11, authorities announced that the government and the federation of health unions had come to an agreement whereby "Michoacan would be the first entity where the federation initiates the standardization of workers of the health sector in order to grant social security," according to a report in *Excelsior*.

Upon release of the announcement, members of the Health Services Decentralized Workers Union of Michoacan were instructed to return to work.

The addition of the workers to the system will not go into effect immediately, but will await a SSM census to determine which workers qualify.

Honduran hospital janitors strike over overdue wages

About 80 janitorial and maintenance employees at the privately owned Mario Rivas hospital in Tegucigalpa, Honduras downed their tools October 9 over unpaid salaries. Many of the workers—who have struck on previous occasions—have not been paid for nine months.

One striking worker told *La Prensa*, "Since last year they have been foot-dragging about this problem. Last Christmas, we were without money and it looks like this one will be the same." Another told reporters, "We owe everybody," and that in order to make ends meet, "we gather plastic bottles to sell them."

The workers noted that they only get paid when they strike, after which the problem reemerges.

Auxiliary nurses at the hospital have joined the striking workers.

Honduran president threatens striking doctors

On October 9, in an improvised press conference, Honduran post-coup president Porfirio Lobo announced his intention to have a strike by hundreds of doctors in the public medical sector declared illegal. Lobo told reporters that the strike did not follow proper procedures for resolving issues: "For there to be a strike first there has to be a process of conciliation; if the process doesn't resolve it, you have to go to a process of mediation and from there you have to go to arbitration, that is to say a process."

He also claimed that the doctors "have created a problem where it doesn't exist," and threatened to sanction the striking medical workers. The threat was immediately seconded by a Health Secretariat official, who told the doctors to wait eight days for the Secretariat to study the issues.

The demands the doctors are striking over include standardization of salaries, a pay raise, payment of overdue salaries, and improvement of pensions.

The entire health system in Honduras is in crisis. Workers at two psychiatric hospitals continued their protests in front of the Finance Secretariat, demanding the payment of their benefits and overtime pay. Doctors across the nation are demanding better pay and more investment in public health facilities. Interns have not received any pay since January and, according to a report in *El Herald*, "Despite the fact that the government, in a dialogue, reached an agreement with auxiliary nurses and representatives of the Medicine, Hospital and Similar Workers Union (Sitramedhis), the system remains in a coma."

Chilean preschool workers continue strike, protests over breach of contract, working conditions, wage freeze

About 12,000 out of 14,000 workers at Chile's Fundación Integra preschools continued on strike last week to press their demands. The workers walked out in late September following protests and demonstrations over continued intransigence by the board of directors, headed by Cecilia Morel, wife of Chilean president Sebastian Piñeda, over a range of issues.

The preschool workers oppose the implementation of Decree 115, which increases the number of children for each classroom from 12 to 22 without increasing the number of *tías técnicas* ("technician auntie" or teacher's assistant/childcare worker). Workers have occupied some of the facilities to prevent the employment of unqualified personnel, a practice that one union

official called “openly illegal and completely lacking ethically.”

Other demands include payment of a raise in salaries and a bonus, agreed to in the contract but frozen for two years under the claim that there is not enough money in the budget. Workers have pointed out that regional Integra directors recently received a 10 percent raise despite the supposed lack of funds.

The workers are also calling for job security—threatened by the widespread use of subcontract labor—and improvements in working conditions.

The CUT federation has called on Morel to respond to the workers’ demands, but so far the First Lady has stonewalled. On October 8, five Integra employees began a hunger strike.

Brazilian teachers, public sector workers protest wages, labor conditions, spending priorities

On October 8, teachers in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro—on strike for over a month and a half—demonstrated to protest the inadequate salary and benefits package offered by the city’s mayor, as well as insufficient resources for education. They were joined by tens of thousands of supporters, who braved torrential downpours to add their own demands, including improved social services and an end to police brutality.

Teachers at the demonstration explained to reporters that there were other issues in addition to their low salaries, including steady privatization and chronic supply shortages. One teacher said that after six years, “conditions have gotten worse and worse. Every year we have less autonomy.”

A similar mobilization took place in Sao Paulo in support of the teachers. In both cities, masked members of the Black Bloc anarchist alliance—or people claiming to be members—were in attendance as well. When they began vandalizing local businesses and throwing objects, police attacked protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets, and percussion grenades.

The main teachers union in Rio de Janeiro, the Education Professionals State Syndicate (SEPE) released a statement on its website alleging that undercover police, as they had in the past, infiltrated the protest and provoked the violence. In a press conference, SEPE coordinator Marta Moraes refused to comment on questions about the Black Bloc other than to say, “We do not belong to that group, we do not agree with violence, and we have a different ideology than they do.”

A much smaller protest was carried out by striking schoolteachers, postal workers and students in Cuiaba, where FIFA (International Football Association Federation) secretary general Jerome Valcke visited the construction site of the Arena Pantanal, one of 12 venues scheduled to host the 2014 World Cup. The protesters carried signs against the lavish spending on the stadiums and chanted slogans like “FIFA Go Home” and “Less World Cup, more health and education.”

The United States

Grocery strike temporarily averted in Washington State

Labor negotiations continued over the weekend between 30,000 workers and representatives for four major grocery chains in the Seattle, Washington area. Safeway, GFC, Fred Meyer and Albertsons are demanding a freeze in base pay and reduction in holiday pay.

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 21 said workers were prepared to begin strike action as talks between the two sides appeared to show no movement as an October 11 deadline approached. According to Local 21, however, the companies apparently agreed to remove a demand to force workers logging less than 30 hours to get health insurance under the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act.

Since then, negotiations have been continuing, with wages and other benefits issues still unresolved. Earlier last week, the Teamsters issued a press release that said its members would honor picket lines set up by grocery workers.

Canada

Park workers on strike in Quebec

Nearly 700 workers at 22 public parks across the Province of Quebec went on strike over the Thanksgiving weekend in Canada to protest being without a contract for nearly a year.

The workers are represented by the Société des établissements de plein air du Québec (SEPAQ). Negotiations are continuing even though all of the parks affected remain open and operating. The main issue in dispute, aside from a long lapsed contract, is wages, with the government offering a 4 percent increase over five years—well below the union demand of increases to keep pace with inflation, which is running at about 2 percent a year. The average wage for park workers is around \$14 an hour.

Hamilton Children’s Aid workers face shutdown days

Workers at the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in Hamilton, Ontario were off the job last Friday in the first of five shut-down days being planned by the CAS to address a severe funding shortfall from the Provincial Liberal government.

The 250 workers affected are organized under the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which held a rally on the day of the walkout under the banner “Stop the Shutdown—Fund Child Welfare”. With one of the highest poverty rates in the country, at least 6,000 children in Hamilton use food banks. The union cites a recent provincial budget cut to child welfare of \$4.7 million over four years, which has also meant at least 70 layoffs in CAS.

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