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NICARAGUA

Public Health Sector Strike

Striking public hospital doctors and health workers could not counter International Monetary Fund (IMF) mandates, and, though their strike rolls on, the approved '06 budget denies most of the public health sector's demands.

On 14 Nov, 3,000 doctors affiliated with the Pro-Salary Doctors' Movement went on strike demanding a 140% wage increase, and were joined three days later by the 24,000 members of the Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD), who demanded a 100% wage increase. Medical personnel are only treating emergency cases while they negotiate with the Ministries of Health (MINSA) and Labor (MITRAB) to include their wage increases in the '06 General Budget proposal.

The average salary for a doctor working for the public health service in Nicaragua is \$200 a month, while nurses and auxiliary workers earn, on average, between \$70 and \$90 a month. The average wage for doctors in Central America is \$500 a month. After two weeks of negotiations, FETSALUD agreed to reduce its demands to a 35% pay raise and doctors reduced their demand to a 70% increase. However, Minister of Health Margarita Gurdian was only able to add \$4.2 million to the proposed \$6.2 million budget for public health sector salaries.

"Anymore money for salaries," said Gurdian, "would be impossible because the government has signed an agreement with the IMF that does not allow pay raises for public sector workers above the rate of inflation." Accordingly, the '06 budget includes a 9% pay raise to the health sector, which strikers say is not good enough.

"The government does not care if the health service is paralyzed," said the president of FETSALUD, Gustavo Porras, in response to the government's inability to meet the strikers' demands.

After its 25 Nov ratification, the '06 budget was passed on for IMF approval, which, as the nation's lending agency, oversees its spending. The government estimates an '06 GDP of \$1.02 billion, and its proposed expenditures detailed in the ratified budget totals \$1.3 billion—\$169.2 million is allotted for

the health sector. In order to meet the striking health workers demands an additional \$88 million would have to be granted.

With Congress on holiday for most of Dec, FETSALUD has suspended its strike until Jan. “We have decided to suspend the strike so as not to do any more damage to the Nicaraguan people,” said Porras.

Meanwhile, the doctors say they have no intention of discontinuing their strike until their demands are fully met. In a 29 Nov meeting with leaders of the Pro-Salary Doctors’ Movement, Health Minister Gurdian presented several alternatives to appease the doctors other than an increased wage. All her proposals, which included life insurance for all public doctors and more and better equipment in hospitals and health centers, were rejected.

“Until we are guaranteed the pay raise we demand, we will continue our complete and indefinite strike,” said the Pro-Salary Doctors’ Movement director, Elio Artola, upon leaving the meeting.

On 26 Nov, Minister of Labor Virgilio Gurdian threatened to declare the strike illegal. If so, MINSA would be permitted to begin firing strikers. In response, a Pro-Salary Doctors’ Movement representative said, “We are aware of the fact that they could try to remove us, but we are not afraid.” As of 7 Dec, Gurdian had not carried through with his threat.

Ortega Rides Supreme Court, Jockeys for Position

With the Supreme Court justices affiliated with the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) absent from the hearing, justices supportive of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) ruled on two cases that could greatly improve the chances of victory for FSLN presidential candidate Daniel Ortega.

The court ruled in favor of allowing PLC dissident Eduardo Montealegre and his newly created party, the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (NLA), to use his former party’s symbols and music during his ’06 presidential campaign. The FSLN justices also reversed a Managua Appeals Court decision that ended an investigation into the possible improper sale of city property by former Managua mayor and ’06 presidential candidate Herty Lewites.

Lewites is an FSLN party dissident and was atop the most recent polls. He responded that Ortega (who during his presidency had appointed the FSLN justices) had used his judicial influence to reverse the Managua Appeals Court decision in an attempt to inhibit his candidacy, allowing Ortega to rise as the only candidate from the left. With Lewites excluded from the race, and the right divided between the PLC and the NLA, Ortega would have a strong chance to win the 35% of the vote necessary to claim the presidency.

Lewites said he was determined not to let this happen. “Despite whatever maneuver [Ortega] wants to carry out against us ... I can tell the Nicaraguan people that I am not worried and that it is a fact that I am going to run as a presidential candidate.”

Vice President Wilfredo Navarro (PLC), who has stated his interest in assuming the PLC ’06 presidential candidacy, called the court’s rulings “immoral” and said that he will do everything he can to reverse the decisions. “The PLC will take all the necessary steps to prevent Montealgre from using our

party's symbols," said Navarro. He added that the international organizations that will observe the election will be fully aware of the FSLN's attempts to inhibit Lewites' candidacy.

The PLC justices argued that the vote of FSLN Justice Rogers Camilo Argüello should be discounted because he is currently under investigation for alleged involvement in a scandal regarding \$609,000 that is missing from a Supreme Court bank account. A PLN justice would have to rule in his place, opening the possibility for reversing the decision.

In a 23 Nov poll of 1,200 Nicaraguans, 28% favored Lewites, running under the newly-formed Christian Alternative platform, while 26.2% favored Montealegre (NLA). Daniel Ortega (FSLN) received 18.5% approval, while only 10.4% of those polled responded in favor of the incumbent PLC, which has yet to announce its candidate.

Panama Still Asking for Alemán

Nicaraguan Attorney General Julio Centeño refused Panamanian requests for judicial assistance to notify ex-President Arnoldo Alemán, and nine others involved in a money laundering case, of their required attendance at a preliminary hearing in Panama, sparking a month-long heated exchange between the two countries' judicial authorities.

Panamanian authorities have accused the ex-President, his wife, father-in-law, the former head of revenue and six other friends of utilizing the Panamanian banking system to launder \$74.9 million. In Oct, the Panamanian Attorney General asked Centeño to carry out the necessary measure to ensure that the accused would be present at the preliminary trial. The Nicaraguan Supreme Court, dominated by appointees of Alemán's Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), declared that the request for judicial assistance violated Central American treaties—stating that the District Attorney does not have the authority to carry out the appeal and therefore it is invalid.

The Director of Panama's Justice and Government Ministry, Edwin Aldeano, wrote a letter in response to Centeño's refusal, which was published in the Nicaraguan media, charging Centeño of unwillingness to cooperate and allowing his friendship with Alemán to obstruct justice. Centeño responded at a press conference that Aldeano's letter was "only an initial response to annoyance."

Nevertheless, former President Alemán, who is currently serving a 20-year house arrest sentence for fraud and corruption during his presidential term, can now add contempt of court to the charges he faces in Panama.

—*Rob Fischer*