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John Neagle

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Peru: Miners, Bank Employees, Medical Doctors On Strike

by John Neagle

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Inflation in the last 12 months has surpassed 5,000. Hundreds of thousands are unemployed. The minimum wage in Peru is $45 a month. On Aug. 11, most of Peru's 30,000 bank employees went on strike to demand higher wages, forcing the stock market to close. The Federation of Bank Employees, whose members earn from $250 to $310 a month, are asking for increases of about $400 a month. The banks, 80% state-owned, have offered $90. [On Friday, secretary general of the Civil Construction Workers Union, Pedro Huilca, said union members would strike Aug. 16 to protest the "grave crisis of hunger and misery experienced by the workers and the public."] On Aug. 14, an estimated 75,000 of Peru's 80,000 miners launched an indefinite strike for higher wages and nationwide collective bargaining. At present, each company negotiates with its own workers and there is great variation in wage scales. The union, the National Federation of Miners and Metal Workers, is seeking a minimum wage of about $500 per month for all miners, regardless of employer. Union reports indicate that large mines pay between $5 and $12 a day while small and medium-sized mines pay between $2 and $6 a day. According to mining industry sources, general strikes cost Peru some $5 million a day. Seventy percent of Peruvian mines are state-run. Mining export revenues, totaling $1.2 billion last year, account for more than half the country's exports. Jorge Quesada, union secretary-general, said that 27 miners, including nine union leaders, were detained Monday by army troops at mines near La Oroya, 100 miles east of Lima. Since last year the La Oroya area has been under a state of emergency, imposed as part of the government's program against leftist guerrillas. In 1988, miners were off the job for a total of three months in two separate walkouts over the issue of collective bargaining. To end the strikes last year, in December the government signed an accord with union leaders providing tentative approval to collective bargaining. Private mine owners rejected the agreement, which they argued illegally modified existing contracts. The mine owners association has said the 1988 strikes cost Peru $497 million in lost production and exports. On Monday, union leaders told reporters that they had held talks termed positive with government representatives. However, said the union representatives, private mine owners were refusing to honor agreements already signed with the union. Next, they said a retirement law passed last January had not yet gone into effect. Peru's second-largest mining operation is the US-owned Southern Peru Copper Corp. Its foundry is located in Ilo, 550 miles southeast of Lima. Aug. 14 marked the 77th day of a strike by medical doctors employed by the public health service. The 8,000 doctors average about $100 a month, and are seeking a wage hike of about $290 a month. Thus far, the government's highest offer has been $250. (Basic data from AP, 08/11/89, 08/14/89; Xinhua, 08/11/89; AFP, 08/14/89)

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