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Panama: 68 Trade Unions Stage 24-hour Walkout To Protest Government Economic Policies

by Deborah Tyroler

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According to the Agence France Presse, on the evening of Dec. 4, tens of thousands of workers participated in a rally in downtown Panama City. A total of 68 trade unions had organized a 24-hour nationwide strike to protest the government's economic policies. The strike commenced at midnight. The unions had called on the government to terminate privatization of state-run companies, pay workers the traditional holiday bonus (equivalent to a month's salary), and implement labor code reforms. Negotiations with government officials broke down two weeks ago. Strike organizer Isaac Rodriguez said the workers would not be deterred by threats of mass firings by Vice President Guillermo Ford. In a Dec. 5 radio broadcast, President Guillermo Endara criticized the "irresponsible attitude of certain police" officers who had decided to participate in the strike. He also called on parents in the Panama City metropolitan area to keep their children home from school. Former colonel Eduardo Herrera, who escaped Dec. 4 from a maximum security prison and was holed up in police headquarters on Wednesday, responded to Endara's statements in a radio broadcast. Speaking on behalf of police, he presented a series of demands, and asserted that police officers had every intention of joining the strike. (See article this issue for coverage of Herrera's escape, and subsequent "uprising" by police.) Local media sources reported that the strike came and went without major impact. Mario Ysturain, a spokesperson for the strike organizers, said the police uprising led by Herrera was partially to blame for the disappointing turnout. Ysturain said Herrera's action took several strike leaders out of circulation because they were forced to take precautionary measures to avoid arrest. Ysturain said the walkout affected 50% of railway service between Colon and Panama City, operations at the two public universities, the port of Balboa, municipal trash collection, the Public Works Ministry, and customs services. (Basic data from AFP, 12/03-05/90)

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