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Panamanian President Attempts To Fire All Participants In Dec. 5 Strike: Summary Of Developments

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 7: At a press conference, public employee union leaders Isaac Rodriguez and Rolando Miller denounced legislation proposed by President Guillermo Endara to fire workers who participated in the Dec. 5 strike. Rodriguez is a leader of the electricity company union, and Miller, the telecommunications union. Both are leaders of the National Right to Life Coordinator, comprised of over 60 trade unions. (See CAU 12/07/90 for coverage on strike.) Miller said the proposed legislation invites the working class to confrontation, rather than dialogue, and that the government's real intent is to decapitate the labor movement. Passage of the law would then provide the government with greater maneuvering room to impose its austerity plan, further undermining the interests of poor and underemployed Panamanians. Rodriguez reiterated that the strike last week was not in any way connected to a police uprising led by former police chief Eduardo Herrera. The right to strike is a constitutional one, he said. The union leader pointed out that Endara and others currently in power applauded the unions for striking during the regime of deposed leader Manuel Antonio Noriega. President Guillermo Endara called Rodriguez an ingrate and a traitor. He said, "Democracy brought (Rodriguez) back to Panama. It gave him his position. Now the first thing that he does is fight against democracy." Dec. 11: The Legislative Assembly's labor committee agreed to discuss proposed legislation authorizing the dismissal of workers who participated in the Dec. 5 general strike. President Endara submitted the bill, asking for rapid action by the congress since the strike was "closely linked" to the Dec. 5 police uprising. Isaac Rodriguez said that about 400 public employees had already been fired in the past few days, including himself and other Coordinator leaders. Dec. 12: The Coordinator announced plans for a strike and a demonstration in front of the US Embassy. Rodriguez told reporters that the action would be a "peaceful protest" against US military intervention last week to quash the so-called coup. The Coordinator also planned a march to the Legislative Assembly on Dec. 13 to protest Endara's proposed legislation authorizing the firing of workers who participated in the Dec. 5 general strike. The Agence France Presse reported that about 100 protesting workers tore down iron grates outside the legislature building and burst into the chamber. Congresspersons were "visibly nervous." AFP provided no further details of the incident. Employees at the state-run electricity company (IRHE) staged a sit-down strike to demand respect for labor legislation and payment of year-end bonuses, and to protest privatization of public sector enterprises. Union leaders claimed 60% of all employees participated. Police occupied several public employee union locals. Rodriguez described the occupation of electricity and port authority union offices as repressive and fascist. Dec. 13: Hundreds of public sector employees who were fired since the Dec. 5 strike and student sympathizers clashed with over 100 riot squad police in and around the Legislative Assembly building. Police removed the protesters with the use of tear gas and bird shot. Demonstrators later set fire to at least four vehicles, paper, wood and car tires in the area. Notimex reported that at least one policeman was injured, and several television journalists were beaten in clashes between police and protesters. (Basic data from AFP, 12/11-13/90; Notimex, 12/07/90, 12/13/90)

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