

11-8-1991

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Panamanian Health Care Professionals Strike: Chronology Of Events." (1991). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/6646>

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Panamanian Health Care Professionals Strike: Chronology Of Events

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, November 8, 1991

Oct. 27: Planning Minister and Vice President Guillermo Ford said austerity measures recommended by multilateral financial institutions would be approved by the national legislature prior to a November meeting with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank representatives in Washington, DC. Included are reforms of the Social Security Fund (Caja de Seguro Social-CSS) charter; dismissal of 22,000 public employees; trade liberalization; privatization of 11 state-run enterprises, and a tax reform package. Oct. 28: About 3,000 doctors, dentists and other public health professionals commenced a 48-hour strike. Emergency medical centers remained open. The labor action was in part a response to the government's plans to cut health care expenditures. CSS director Jorge Endara, President Guillermo Endara's uncle, said reforms are necessary to achieve financial solvency. According to Endara, the Fund is currently running a deficit of about US\$225 million per year. CSS Physicians Association (AMOACSS) spokesperson Miguel Calobrides said the strikers accept the need for reforms at the Institute. Meanwhile, he added, strikers believe an independent audit should be carried out at the CSS in order to verify government claims regarding the Institute's deficit. Health Minister Guillermo Rolla described the strike as "a grossly irresponsible measure," given that Panama is currently suffering from a cholera epidemic. Oct. 29: AMOACSS members decided to extend the strike at least through Nov. 1 due to legislators' failure to respond to their demands. Health Minister Rolla told reporters that the strikers would be replaced by unemployed doctors if the strike continues. Edilberto Mendez, leader of the National Organized Workers Council (CONATO), said CONATO supports the health professionals, and was considering a nationwide solidarity strike. CONATO members number around 80,000 private sector employees. Oct. 30: CONATO members demonstrated in capital city streets to show support for the CSS professionals' strike. Minister Rolla asserted that the CSS strikers were being manipulated by the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). (Basic data from Agence France-Presse, 10/27-30/91; ACAN-EFE, 10/28/91, 10/30/91)

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