

Venezuelan doctors lead anti-IMF fight

by David Ramonet

Some 65,000 doctors who serve in Venezuela's public hospitals and clinics have been on strike since Dec. 28, 1996, attending only emergency rooms and intensive care wards since Jan. 14. In addition to wage and pension demands, the striking doctors are demanding that the government guarantee that hospitals will be provided with the necessary supplies and equipment to keep patients from dying.

The propaganda against the doctors charges that they have betrayed the Hippocratic Oath and abandoned their patients. But the few doctors who have managed to get on television, have explained that the public hospitals have, in fact, been killing patients for the past eight years, because of the lack of adequate personnel, equipment, and supplies. According to these doctors, the budget for medical assistance has been slowly pared away, and is now 30% *less* than the 1989 budget.

By late January, the Rafael Caldera government finally committed itself, after months of refusal, to an average 135% increase in wages, which the doctors accepted, despite their original demand for a 1,000% increase. The government has also promised adequate provisioning of the hospitals. However, neither pledge has yet been carried out.

The strike by the Venezuelan Medical Federation (FMV) comes at a time when workers from a number of sectors of the economy are either on strike, or planning protest actions. Because it is not merely a fight for better wages, the doctors' strike has become the spearhead for a social protest movement to confront head-on the "Venezuela Agenda" austerity policy, initiated last April by President Caldera, under International Monetary Fund dictates. Fully aware that the vanguard doctors' strike could lead a mass strike process in the country, government spokesmen, led by Planning Minister Teodoro Petkoff, have attempted to counter the strike by warning the media that the doctors' demands "endanger last year's achievements of the Venezuela Agenda."

The so-called achievements of the Venezuela Agenda are: a public spending surplus of nearly 8% of GNP; an increase of more than \$5 billion in international reserves; and a balance-of-payments surplus. But the public spending surplus has its expression today in critical shortages in public hospitals, schools, and family income. In Caracas, there are hospitals where only three out of seven operating rooms are functional. If public hospitals have not closed entirely, patients are being told to bring food, medicines, sheets, alcohol, rubber

gloves, and more, when they check in. Blood banks are refusing donations because they lack adequate storage facilities for the blood. And, of course, patients are dying on the operating table for lack of transfusions. On top of this, the pharmacies and dispensaries of public hospitals are bereft of even the most basic medicines.

The truth is that there is a deliberate policy to force the public health system, as well as the Venezuelan Social Security Institute, into bankruptcy, with the intention of ultimately privatizing it, as part of a neo-liberal offensive to destroy the very institution of the nation-state.

Mass strike in the making

The government was moved to grant the doctors a wage increase only at the point that sympathy for their cause began to spread among other professional associations. The 135% increase the doctors received raises their monthly income from a baseline of approximately \$170, to approximately \$395.

Twenty-four professional associations of public employees have created their own organization, the Professional Forum, and are now demanding a similar wage increase, and, just as important, that the government guarantee adequate facilities, supplies, and so on, for them to carry out their services. Since Jan. 15, public university professors across the country have been striking, demanding a 125% wage hike, free higher education, and the proper supplies for university libraries, laboratories, cafeterias, and transportation.

Although both the doctors' movement and the Professional Forum have been politicized in the worst of senses—that is, every political party is competing to offer its "leadership"—the situation will not be solved by conventional deals, because at issue is the government's entire economic policy, and not the negotiation of particular demands.

It is in this same context that the Venezuelan Workers Federation (CTV) has rejected the proposal of Minister Petkoff—a former Communist guerrilla from the 1970s, turned neo-liberal pragmatist—for a Chilean-style privatization of pension funds, as an intended shot-in-the-arm to the Caracas Stock Exchange. On Jan. 31, after meeting with IMF director Michel Camdessus, Finance Minister Luis Raúl Matos Azócar reported that Venezuela has asked to renew its stand-by agreement with the IMF, while pledging certain additional elements of "structural reform." Included among these reforms are a new social security (pension fund) structure, and a public administration reform that would translate into layoffs for 75% of the the public workforce.

After the breach the striking doctors have made in the IMF's austerity fortress, the Workers Federation has determined not to surrender its hard-won rights. The Caldera government is thus faced with the choice of either imposing the IMF's "Venezuela Agenda" by force, or opening up a national dialogue that can formulate a new agenda based on social and economic progress, not starvation.