

# Childcare workers begin vigil outside National Assembly in Venezuelan capital <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** *Venezuelanalysis.com*

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 27 May 2014

## EXCERPTS

Caracas, 27th May 2014 (*Venezuelanalysis.com*) - With at least one representative from each of Venezuela's 23 states, some 100 childcare workers gathered yesterday outside the National Assembly. "We're revolutionaries, not slaves. We cannot live on 2975 bolívares a month-barely 70% of the nation's minimum wage. And we get no benefits or pensions." The women pointed out that they had been petitioning the government since 2008. Now they are prepared to hold a vigil, "We'll sleep here, outside the National Assembly or outside the President's Palace for as long as it takes to get our rights," a spokeswoman told *venezuelanalysis.com*.

One angry childcare worker after the next, explained her plight to a microphone held by a reporter in front of the camera from ANTV, the cable TV station for the National Assembly. No other press besides *venezuelanalysis.com* was present. They had travelled through the night from as far away as Mérida. Although they had no press release, they carried signs demanding Maduro's attention and handed this reporter a copy of an open letter they had written to President Maduro.

It began, "Receive a cordial Bolivarian, revolutionary, socialist, Chavista and feminist greeting, affirming our support for your administration." They said that they were taking the opportunity to inform him of changes needed to promote the values of equity, equality and social justice regarding their labor as childcare workers. They drew his attention to their precarious situation. They do not receive minimum wage, food allowances, vacations, hospital insurance (primary care is available to all Venezuelans through Barrio Adentro), end-of-year bonuses, social security, pensions and a variety of other benefits guaranteed to most workers in Venezuela.

"We feel frustrated," the letter continued, "that year after year the government increases wages, but we who fulfill the job given to us by the Ministry of Education are not taken into account. We are "madres integrales," some of us with more than 34 years of experience, and our rights are being violated, while we do the respectable work of substitute mothers, psychologists, teachers, nurses and peace mediators.... We feel invisible ... We ask to be recognized as workers, granting us....our rights to a dignified wage and stability."

The childcare workers expressed their outrage at being labeled "volunteers" or "assistants", when they daily work eight-hour shifts, completing the same functions as cooks and other workers covered by the Organic Labor Law. "We must be recognized as workers with rights under the law," a woman from Apure yelled.

Towards the end of their letter to President Maduro they emphasized the connection between recognizing their rights and the rights of all women. "We are the invisible lever behind the social productive labor force of the nation. As such, we demand to be treated with justice and respect for our conditions as women workers." A spokeswoman from Miranda told *venezuelanalysis.com*, "If our work is not respected, no women's work can be respected. The advancement of other mothers in the workforce who need childcare cannot be on our backs."

In 2004, the Ministry of Education and Sports founded the early education program they called "Proyecto Simoncito", with the goal of educating children from infancy through six years, for full participation in a "democratic, multiethnic, multicultural society of protagonists." In 2005, Aristobulo Isturiz told *Venezuelanalysis.com* that the Ministry of Education expected the Simoncito pre-schools to provide children from poor backgrounds with food, health care, education and emotional support to level the playing field so that they would arrive at first grade on an equal footing with children from more advantaged backgrounds. The Minister of Education, in the same 2005 interview pointed out that Article 9 of the Law of Equal Opportunity for Women calls for the pre-school curricula to challenge traditional gender roles and contribute towards eliminating gender bias and sexism.

The Ministry of Education named the pre-schools "Simoncitos", or Little Simons", after 19th century Venezuelan independence leader, Simon Bolivar. Whether Simoncitos are identified as childcare centers or pre-schools, the workers at yesterday's vigil also protested their lack of training. Since 2008, they insisted, they had been promised pedagogical instruction, but had yet to receive it.

According to 2013 reports from the Ministry of Education, some 70% of pre-school age children, or 1.5 million, are enrolled in pre-schools. Everlin Merlo, one of the spokeswomen for the childcare workers, reported that there are currently 25,000 workers at the Simoncitos, down from 35,000 in 2008. She also said that each childcare worker is supposed to be responsible for 10 children, yet, these estimates indicate that the ratio varies from 43 to 60 children per worker. Early childhood educators have frequently pointed out that overworked, underpaid and undertrained workers cannot fulfill the lofty roles assigned to them.

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