

The Americas

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Cooling-off period ends for University of California teaching assistants

Negotiators for the United Auto Workers-led student employee unions at the University of California and management have failed to reach an agreement following the expiration of the cooling-off period that ended last December's strike. The UAW called off the system-wide strike by 9,000 teaching assistants in an agreement worked out with state Democrats. UAW officials said their action was a "good faith commitment" that talks during the cooling off period might resolve the issue of recognition for UC teaching assistants.

The strike was called to secure collective bargaining rights for teaching assistants at UC. A majority of 9,000 workers at all eight UC teaching campuses have chosen union representation as verified by the state labor board. UC management has argued that teaching assistants are students and do not qualify for collective bargaining rights. While UAW officials have told TAs that they might resume the strike, they have focused their attention on getting Democratic legislators, state labor boards and judges to intervene in their favor.

Steelworkers strike at Kaiser Aluminum three months old

Kaiser Aluminum Corp. reported a 1998 fourth quarter loss of \$38.9 million last week, saying an ongoing strike by 3,000 United Steelworkers of America members contributed "significantly" to the decline. But the company quickly assured its investors that it believes incremental strike expenses are behind it, and the continuing strike is not expected to have an impact on first quarter results.

"Although the short-term cost of the strike has been significant, we have benefited from the experience by gaining additional valuable knowledge about more

efficient ways to manage the operations," said Kaiser Chairman and Chief Executive Officer George Haymaker.

The strike at five plants in the states of Washington, Ohio and Louisiana began on September 30. The United Steelworkers of America leadership has followed its traditional pattern of isolating the strike and initiating public relations protests to appeal to stockholders.

Oregon legislator calls for ban on teachers strikes

An Oregon legislator proposed a ban on the right of teachers to go on strike. Bill Morrisette, a former teacher and now a Democrat representative for Springfield, cloaked his call for taking away the democratic right to strike behind rhetoric claiming he wants to avoid the bitterness associated with strikes. President of the Oregon Education Association, Jim Sager, merely responded that the collective bargaining process for teachers should not be tampered with.

Student-labor protests in Ecuador

The "permanent protest" that began last week in Quito by workers and students continues after a battle that left four students and five policemen injured in the capital city on January 28. The students are supported by labor, peasant and Indian organizations.

Those organizations have formed a "United Front of Permanent Protest" to coordinate demonstrations against President Jamil Mahuad's austerity measures. Student protests also took place in Guayaquil and Cuenca, two other major cities in Ecuador.

Bolivian unemployed miners demand severance pay

Four hundred laid-off miners demanding their severance pay canceled their threat of a mass suicide in protest. The miners, who were laid off in 1986, have been promised the equivalent of \$5.5 million in compensation for 12 years of accumulated benefits.

As a sign of their seriousness, the miners had already begun tying their hands and necks with ropes. A last

minute intervention by Milton Gomez, head of the Bolivian trade unions (COB), pressured the government to initiate talks with the miners. The government is appealing an order from the Supreme Court mandating payment. While the miners have temporarily suspended hunger strikes and other measures, they will continue protesting in the streets of La Paz.

Retired workers protest in Peru

On January 28 a group of retired workers began a hunger strike at the Peruvian Congress. They are protesting a new law that abolishes the Peruvian Social Security Agency (IPSS). On that same day, health workers across Peru went on strike and organized demonstrations in Lima, Peru's capital, and other cities. The strike paralyzed all the IPSS hospitals in the country.

The elderly and groups of health workers broke through police barriers in Congress. The law being debated replaces IPSS with Social Security for Health (Essalud). The new agency would lose its autonomy and be controlled by the Ministry of Labor.

While the government of Alberto Fujimori claims that the new organization would benefit a greater number of people, the protesters see it as a first step in abolishing their benefits.

Coal mines to close in Cape Breton

At least 1,000 miners will be laid off over the next two years as the federal government, which owns the Cape Breton Development Corporation mining company, prepares its sell off. This move will mark the end of an industry in the region that has a history spanning over a hundred years.

It is doubtful that a buyer will be found considering that private operators pulled out of the area over 30 years ago, claiming they couldn't make the operation profitable. From a work force of 6,300 in 1967 when the company was formed, employment has declined to 1,667 at the two mines. There are few other job prospects on this impoverished island in Nova Scotia where official unemployment stands at over 19 percent.

The miners have accused the federal and provincial governments of betraying their pledge that the company would not be privatized. The leadership of the United Mine Workers of America local did not suggest any course of action to hundreds of angry miners at a meeting last week, but called the move a scam on the part of the government.

Canadian gardening giant to close 10 stores

At least 500 workers will lost their jobs as Canada's largest plant and craft retailer, White Rose Crafts and Nursery Sales Ltd., shuts down 10 of its 42 retail outlets after filing for bankruptcy protection.

This is the first round of layoffs for the company's 2,600 employees, the vast majority of whom are part-time workers who will not qualify for employment insurance benefits. Two of its largest operations in the Toronto area will be closing, as well as all eight of the company's W.H. Perron stores in Quebec. The company also announced it will close its Montreal and Toronto-Langstaff distribution centers and shift the operations to its current warehouse in Concord, Ontario, just north of Toronto.



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