

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 January 2004

## **Nicaraguan teachers threaten strike**

Nine unions representing 36,000 teachers have told Nicaraguan president Enrique Bolaños that a February strike is inevitable unless the government addresses their wage demands. A letter to the president warned that teachers' patience is running out and educators are ready to strike when the school year begins February 2.

Teachers are demanding wages equivalent to the cost of a basic food needs, about \$161 a month or, as a minimum, to the average of Central American teachers' wages, \$140 a month.

Although satisfying the teachers' demands would only cost around \$10 million, the government is implementing an austerity agreement dictated by the International Monetary Fund that severely limits social spending.

## **Mexican social service workers fight layoffs**

Social service workers have struck against job cuts imposed by Mexico's Social Development Agency (SEDESOL). Management claims it must slim down the agency as part of a campaign to reduce administrative personnel by the Mexican government. SEDESOL has already laid off 1,000 workers over the past three years and seeks to sack 720 more on January 16.

While their union negotiated, SEDESOL employees were on the second day of a strike to protest the workforce reduction. They marched and rallied in downtown Mexico City to demand that the legislature put an end to the layoffs.

In the southern state of Yucatan, 50 workers took over SEDESOL offices January 9. In other parts of Mexico, workers carried out work slowdowns.

Despite the fierce resistance by social service workers, the union is preparing to cave in, negotiating with management over terms of the sackings.

## **Borders bookstore walkout ends in Ann Arbor, Michigan**

Borders bookstore workers voted 20 to 12 to accept a

proposed contract January 8, ending a two-month strike at the original retail location in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The contract, recommended by the leadership of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 876, includes a 3 percent wage increase. The contract doesn't address improvements in health benefits—a major demand by workers—except to require that if Borders offers a better plan to the home office or other stores, they must offer it to the union store. Also, employees can go down to 32 hours and retain benefits.

## **Independent truckers and loggers halt operations in Maine woods**

Loggers and truck drivers in Portage Lake, Maine, voted by 47-3 to halt operations for JD Irving's Maine Woodlands, which supplies wood to lumber mills in Maine, New Brunswick and Quebec. An agreement covering 40 to 50 independent truckers expired on December 31, and drivers have parked their trucks and refused to work under the new terms. Truckers want increases in trucking rates of 25 to 30 percent as opposed to Irving's offer of 10 percent.

About 27 logging contractors, who will negotiate an agreement later on this spring, have also ceased operations. They have united with the truckers in an organization called the International Loggers Association.

The worker-contractors are especially opposed to Irving's most recent agreement, which includes rules that allow the company to cancel contracts at any time, alter compensation rates and, should a trucker quit working, essentially commandeer his equipment to finish a job.

## **Talks resume in Michigan nurses strike after one-year hiatus**

Teamster officials and management negotiators met for the first time in more than a year on December 31 in an effort to restart negotiation involving 470 nurses at the Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey.

A hospital spokesman indicated that the initial

discussion revealed nurses have not backed down from their complaints, which center on low staffing levels and mandatory overtime. Nurses walked off the job 13 months ago in what is now the longest hospital strike in US history.

#### **Strike at Yellow Brick House women's shelter**

Forty counselors at the Yellow Brick House women's shelter, in Aurora, Ontario, are on strike against management attempts to summarily replace nine counselors, including prominent union activists. Their union, Local 3636 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has filed an allegation of unfair labour practice against the employer.

During the holiday season, management applied to the Ontario Labour Board for a forced, supervised final offer vote and, late in the day Monday, cancelled negotiations scheduled for January 6 and 7. On January 12, workers voted to reject management's final offer.

On January 6, striking workers received a show of support from 100 York Region municipal workers, members of CUPE Local 905, who joined them on the picket line.

#### **Talks resume at University of Victoria**

Talks between teaching assistants and the administration at the University of Victoria are set to resume Monday and continue through Wednesday of this week. The 800 teaching assistants, represented by CUPE Local 4163, have been in a legal strike position since Friday morning. They are presently working-to-rule and holding information pickets. They are demanding wage parity with other British Columbia universities, relief from tuition costs, sick leave and parental leave provisions.

Representatives of the university, in rejecting the teaching assistants' demands, have cited BC Liberal legislation that forbids wage increases in the public sector. During the past two years, tuition costs—which must be paid as a condition of employment for the teaching assistants—have risen 70 percent.

#### **Workers at Queens University to hold strike vote**

Four-hundred-thirty librarians, custodians, trades people and lab technicians at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, will hold a strike vote January 13. Mediated talks between the university and the three CUPE locals that represent the workers are to take place January 14 through 16. The workers have been without a contract since June 30, 2003. They are

demanding wage increases, improvements to the benefits plan and better job security. Strike action could begin as early as January 17.



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