

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Puerto Rico: School bus drivers threaten strike**

Puerto Rican school bus drivers are threatening to strike this week. The main issue is back wages. The drivers say the government owes all of them some US\$30 million. The government blames the arrears on a fiscal crisis and has yet to say when the funds will be available.

The school bus drivers involved in the dispute work in Arecibo, on Puerto Rico's north coast, and in 10 nearby cities. Christmas break begins in mid-December. There will be no classes for several weeks after that.

## **Mexico: Taxco miners protest**

About 300 miners, members of the Taxco section of the National Miners and Metalworkers Union, blocked roads into this tourist city to demand that Mexico's mining firms and the governor of the state of Guerrero address their demands. The workers have been on strike since June 30, 2007, demanding that their union president, Napoleon Gomez, be allowed to return from Canadian exile.

Gomez was removed from office by former Mexican President Vicente Fox in the wake of the Pasta de Concho mine collapse in February of 2006 and is being charged with embezzlement by the Mexican government.

The strikers are also demanding that the government unfreeze US\$1.5 million in local union funds. If this second demand is not met the miners have pledged to continue blocking access to tourist sites in Guerrero.

## **Chile: Vocational school educators set to strike**

This week vocational school instructors at 10 Santiago technical schools will go on strike. The professors are demanding that their wages be raised to that of academic instructors in equivalent institutions. They point out that, due to a loophole in Chile's education law, their salaries are minimal.

## **Uruguay: Meatpackers on strike**

Workers at the Canelones meatpacking plant walked off their jobs last Thursday. They are demanding the implementation of a wage adjustment agreed on several months ago. The strikers are also questioning the formula used to calculate the wage increase and demanding that a new one be established based on current wages and structured to favor the lowest paid workers.

The company insists on basing the wage formula on last year's wages.

## **Mexico: Educators on hunger strike**

Oaxaca teachers, members of the National Educator's Union (SNTE), began a hunger strike last Wednesday across the street from the city's cathedral. The protesters are demanding that municipal and state authorities address demands left open since the mass protest in Oaxaca in 2006.

These demands relate to the funding for schools and the repair of school facilities that are falling apart. In addition, the hunger strikers are demanding the rehiring of teachers that were sacked in 2006.

## **Minnesota hospital workers stage two-day strike**

Hospital workers at Regina Medical Center in Hastings, Minnesota carried out a two-day strike November 24-25 over pensions and healthcare issues. Hospital management is seeking to reduce its retirement contribution from 8 percent to 6

percent for workers with six or more years and from 4 to 3 percent for workers with five years or less.

Workers carried signs near the hospital reading: "All we want for Xmas is my pension saved" and "Keep our future secure."

Currently, the hospital is offering wages of 3 percent in each year of a new three-year agreement. But workers insist retirement and healthcare concessions would wipe out these increases.

The negotiations involve some 230 members of the Service Employees International Union, including nursing assistants, physical therapy aides, x-ray aides, housekeepers, dietary workers, medical transcriptionists, operating room aides, patient care technicians and other caregivers.

The strikers have received strong community support. People brought coffee, rolls and sandwiches for picketers during the first day of the strike.

### **Tentative agreement in Ohio transit strike**

A tentative agreement was reached November 24 between the Portage Area Regional Transit Authority (PARTA) and the union representing some 65 drivers who provide bus service for the Kent, Ohio area. The workers had been on strike for three months.

The Ohio Association of Public School Employees Local 037, which represents drivers, agreed to put the agreement to a vote after failing to get a so-called fair share clause in the contract, which would allow the union to collect 2 percent of the salaries of nonunion workers.

The new three-year tentative agreement provides raises of 3 percent in the first year and 2.5 percent in each of the subsequent two years. It also provides a healthcare provision for part-time drivers.

The fair-share contract language would have affected part-time drivers who make between \$8 and \$9 an hour. Full-time drivers make up to \$14.05 an hour. The agreement is the first for contract drivers, whose union has been in negotiation since July 2006.

### **Workers at Missouri factory end 10-day strike**

Workers at Hubbell Power Systems plant in Centralia, Missouri voted to accept a new three-year agreement November 18 and return to work after walking picket lines for 10 days. Members of the International Union of Electrical Workers and Communication Workers of America Local 86821

ratified the new agreement by a 249-199 margin.

Details are not completely clear. The new agreement offers an \$800 ratification bonus and a paid half-hour lunch. According to union official Terry King, "They didn't completely get what they wanted, but the picket lines are down and we are going back to work."

The company's original proposal sought to eliminate retirement benefits. King stated that the new contract provides a one-year extension of benefits to provide workers close to retirement with a period to start "some sort of self plan." Under the new agreement workers will only receive benefits for future years of service. Past years will not be considered in calculations.

### **Talks stalled in York University strike**

A provincial mediator has called off negotiations, which resumed last week, in the strike by 3,400 teaching staff at York University in the north end of Toronto. The strike began on November 7. Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), representing the strikers, has said it has revised its proposal to settle the dispute as the school pushes for binding arbitration.

A faction of students is asking the government to legislate an end to the strike and a rally will be held this week at provincial government buildings at Queen's Park. One hundred thirty-eight international students resumed classes last week and 870 more at Osgoode Hall Law School will do the same this week.

A half hour west of York University in Toronto, 1,200 teaching assistants and lecturers at the University of Guelph were in a legal strike position as of December 1, but mediated talks continued through the weekend in an attempt to avoid a work stoppage before exams begin this week.

The TA's are represented by CUPE, the same union on strike at York University. The main issues in their dispute include increased workload and job security.



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