

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Chilean teachers demand payment of ‘historic debt’**

Public school teachers across Chile are on a national strike. The issue is the wage increases owed to them since 1981, during the Pinochet dictatorship. Union sources peg current value of the debt at US\$9 million. The government of Michelle Bachelet denies that such an obligation, widely known as the ‘historic debt,’ actually exists. As a result, the government announced that it would not negotiate with the striking educators until they drop their industrial action.

The government’s position is a reversal from a decision last year by the Chilean house of deputies, which had set an October 12 deadline to resolve the question. The government now claims that the issue is moot because teachers have received multiple wage increases since the end of the dictatorship at a rate that exceeds wage increases for other workers.

The national teachers strike comes in the wake of a one-day warning strike that took place October 13. On Friday teachers marched and rallied in many Chilean cities. Five thousand strikers marched in Santiago.

## **Costa Rican dockworkers strike**

A strike by Costa Rican dockworkers at the Caribbean ports of Limón and Moin ended last Friday. The strike had begun four days earlier, on October 20.

At issue were wages and the reinstatement of 53 dockworkers that had been victimized for initiating the strike.

The 53 men had allegedly stationed themselves at strategic points in both ports, effectively preventing 1,300 stevedores from forming crews to load and unload cargo. Nine ships were idled and a tourist cruise ship had to sail on to Panama.

The day after the strike began, Costa Rican police occupied the docks to facilitate management’s use of strikebreakers, who managed to partially open the Moin port while Limón remained shut. Both ports together handle 80 percent of the country’s maritime trade.

## **Mexican utility workers demand strike action against utility closure**

Thousands of electrical utility workers, members of the Mexican Electricians Union (SME), assembled in Mexico City on Friday while thousands of others, unable to enter the meeting hall, chanted outside, “Strike! Strike! Strike!” The protest rally, called “The Great National Assembly of Popular Resistance,” had been organized to protest the closure of Luz y Fuerza Centro, the electrical utility that serves Mexico City and the region that surrounds it, by Mexican President Felipe Calderón. Calderón fired more than 40,000 employees, all SME members. Workers also demanded that President Calderón leave office.

However SME President Esparza Flores set a different tone when he addressed the angry crowd. He indicated that the SME was going to avoid a confrontation with the Calderón administration. Instead, he indicated that the SME has contracted 100 lawyers to pursue the matter through the courts. While not precluding a general strike altogether, Esparza

made it clear that that was not the course that the SME leadership was contemplating at this point. Another assembly will convene on November 5 to vote on a strike and possibly set a strike date.

This Friday workers will congregate at the Federal Mediation Committee to demand that Calderón's order be reversed. Student leaders also plan to rally in support of the electricians that day.

### **Illinois school district to bring in replacements to break teachers strike**

The Ottawa Township High School (OTHS) board has threatened to bring in replacements if striking teachers have not returned to work by October 26. The 113 teachers have been on strike since September 30 over wages and the board's intent to force teachers to pay first-time health care contributions.

Over the weekend the teachers union countered the board's three-year contract proposal by asking for wage increases amounting to \$1,400 in each of the first two years, followed by \$1,700 in the last year. The union has said it will only agree to pay health insurance costs if the board agrees to allow them to participate in the plan's development. The board refused this request, which led to charges by teachers that it is receiving a kickback.

The strike has ignited tense emotions. Ottawa police escorted board members to their vehicles after a failed negotiating session on October 18, as dozens of angry students, teachers and teachers' supporters waited outside the closed boardroom door. On October 11, OTHS school superintendent John Harrison committed suicide after a round of bargaining. The board maintains the suicide was not strike-related. However, Harrison has been critical of Illinois funding formulas for education. Harrison taught at OTHS for seven years, followed by a four-stint as vice principal, five years as principal, and had served as school superintendent since 2007.

### **Transit workers take job action in London, Ontario**

Bus drivers in the southern Ontario city of London are refusing overtime work in advance of any broader job action, which their union has shown great reluctance in taking.

The 450 drivers are represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). The ATU local president, Pat Hunniford, is claiming that the membership is more likely to force a lockout than take strike action, out of concern over public opposition to a strike.

Although the union is already in a legal strike position they have yet to even hold a strike vote. Union leaders have said they are hoping the London Transit Commission will hire more people to alleviate the overtime demands on its members.



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