Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Guatemala: Teachers demand pay raise

Thousands of teachers from all over Guatemala converged on the nation's capital on Wednesday to protest low wages and demand a pay raise. The teachers have set up tents and cardboard boxes in Guatemala City's Constitution Square and have vowed to stay there until they get a 16 percent pay hike.

The median monthly salary for teachers is around $440, but many teachers work under contracts that pay up to $200 less.

Half of the 16 percent hike teachers are demanding represents an 8 percent raise that the government of President Alvaro Colom promised last year and didn't deliver. Colom claimed Wednesday that the government could not afford the 16 percent, and once again offered 8 percent.

Asking for patience until the nation's tax system is overhauled, Colom urged the teachers to return to the bargaining table.

Peru: Copper miners strike

Just a week after Peruvian gold and silver miners were forced by the nation's Labor Ministry to end a weeklong strike, 630 copper miners at Doe Run Peru's Cobriza mine went out on strike Thursday. The mine workers are demanding that the company pay a bonus it promised last year.

Doe Run Peru is part of the US-based Renco Group, and has gone through a series of crises in the last year, including expulsion from the National Association of Mining, Petroleum and Energy for lack of compliance with government-ordered environmental cleanup plans. Having already cut back its operations in June of last year, the company claims it lacks sufficient funds.

Luis Castillo, head of the miners and metal workers union, told Efe news service that the strike was a response to "non-fulfillment of a collective contract of several points and for economic recognition, since (the striking miners) have worked all year."

He added that miners at two Buenaventura gold mines and one silver mine plan to go back on strike this Thursday. The gold and silver miners were ordered back to work on February 20, but since then none of the outstanding issues that precipitated the previous walkout—primarily profit sharing and safety issues—have been resolved.

Minneapolis janitors' strike called off

Union-organized janitors in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, did not strike Monday morning following an agreement reached between Service Employees International Union Local 26 and the companies they work for. SEIU Local 26 represents more than 4,000 Twin Cities janitors.

The workers have been without a contract since January 8,

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and voted in late January to authorize strike action. According to a press release by management in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Contract Cleaners Association, the new three-year contract offers higher wages and improved health benefits for employers. SEIU Local 26 had no immediate comment on terms of the deal.

Lockout at California country club over health care costs

Management at the Castlewood Country Club in Pleasanton, California, locked out 65 of its food and maintenance workers February 25 as part of the campaign to force workers to pay $739.08 a month for family health insurance. The move came after members of UNITE HERE Local 2850 rejected management's final offer in negotiations dating from November of last year.

The new costs for health insurance would amount to 35 percent of the wages of a full-time maintenance worker. The average wages for Castlewood union members is $12.50 an hour.

Workers strike Philadelphia produce center

Workers began a strike Monday at the Philadelphia Regional Produce market. Teamsters Local 929 members prevented vehicles from entering the South Philadelphia market after walking off the job at midnight in a contract dispute. The main issues in the strike are overtime and management's efforts to force workers to make contributions to their health care and other benefits.

The blockade ended Monday morning after union officials were served a court injunction limiting picketing to two workers. The market supplies produce to restaurants and retailers throughout the region.

Montreal University hit by strike

Almost 2,500 lecturers at the Université de Montréal, which has the second largest enrolment of any university in Canada, went on strike last week causing the school to immediately cancel at least 20 percent of classes.

The strike follows a series of one- and half-day walkouts staged throughout February and after the lecturers voted 71 percent in favor of job action. The main issues in the strike include class sizes, pensions and salaries.

Strike action was taken because negotiations were proceeding too slowly, according to the lecturers' union, the Syndicat des chargées et des chargés de cours de l'Université de Montréal (SCCCUM)-FNEEQ/CSN. Teachers have been working without a contract for nearly six months,

New strike in Sudbury

Office and technical workers at Xstrata Nickel announced strike action for March 1 when their current contract expires after workers returned a mandate of 98 percent in favor of a strike last week. They join workers at Vale Inco in Sudbury, Ontario who have been on strike for seven months.

The office and technical workers who are represented by the United Steelworkers union (USW) are facing threatened changes by the company to seniority provisions, which would affect job security, sick pay and bonuses. Negotiations continued through the weekend, but workers had already begun setting up picket lines by Friday afternoon.

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