

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

assembly scheduled for March 10 will decide on further action.

## Bolivia: Government wage hike decree draws denunciations

On March 2, two weeks after a national strike protesting rising food and fuel prices, the Bolivian government announced an increase in the minimum wage of 20 percent. The minimum wage will thus rise from about 680 Bolivianos (US\$96) to 815 (US\$116).

In addition, the administration of Evo Morales said it would raise the salaries of teachers, health workers, police and soldiers by 10 percent.

The Bolivian Workers' Central (COB) called for a nationwide strike and demonstrations on February 18, after which the Morales government and the COB entered into dialogue. The COB had called for a base salary of around 1,100 Bolivianos (US\$158), which Morales called "preposterous."

Union functionaries rejected the raises, which they consider insufficient, and denounced the unilateral announcement of the increase, Supreme Decree 0809. Terra.com quoted manufacturing union leader Angel Asturias, who declared, "We are in disagreement with the increase of only 10 percent, worse yet because we are not taken into account."

The COB, until recently a steadfast ally of the Morales government, has not said what they will do about their demands, but increasing speculation and price rises for basic foodstuffs and fuel continue. Meanwhile, the head of the nation's transport drivers' union, Franklin Duran, threatened "a 48-hour strike with mobilizations" if authorities do not adjust bus fares. The drivers already struck for 24 hours last week.

## Argentine doctors stage "ballpoint strike"

Doctors and assessors at hospitals in the northwest Argentine city of San Salvador de Jujuy held a 24-hour "ballpoint strike" (paro de lapiceras) on Wednesday, March 2. For the entire day, they refused to fill out prescriptions, certificates (except for death), schedules and other documents, as part of 72 hours of actions in protest over the incompleteness of agreements signed with the government last year.

An assembly of Jujuy's College of Medicine and the Provincial Public Administration Association (APUAP) March 1, voted for the ballpoint strike, which was to be followed by absence from the workplace for two days.

APUAP Secretary General Victor Aramayo told *Jujuy al dia* that "in spite of having demonstrated our good will to end the conflict, we did not receive the necessary responses from the government, so we decided to continue the struggle."

The action was taken as part of demands including pay for department heads and the payment of basic salary increases agreed to last year. An

## Mexican postgraduate students strike at seven campuses

Postgraduate students at seven postgraduate colleges (COLPOS) in southern Mexico struck March 2 over a number of demands, including raises in salaries and benefits and noncompliance by authorities with their contracts. The students are members of the Independent Union of Postgraduate College Workers, SINTCOP, and are asking for time to revise their contract and officially confirm pay and benefits, a request that they have made for the last 15 years.

The strike includes COLPOS campuses of Texcoco, Puebla, Veracruz and others. SINTCOP representation on the campuses is about 2,700.

In 2009, SINTCOP struck for 67 days over the same issues, after which they signed an accord that was supposed to begin the process of homologation so that by 2011 the demands would be satisfied.

The authorities, after many delays, eventually offered raises of 2.6 percent in benefits and 3.9 percent in salaries, arguing that the resources for higher raises did not exist.

An official from Mexico's Department of Labor and Social Services was scheduled to meet with the parties Monday.

The strike follows the lifting of a weeklong strike by the STAUACH academic workers union in Chapingo over similar issues. STAUACH had demanded a 20 percent salary increase, but settled for 3.9 percent, the same being offered to SINTCOP.

## Trinidadian public service workers protest government wage offer

Public service workers formed a human barricade at the entrance to the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain March 3 to protest the government's offer of a 5 percent raise over three years. The PSA public workers' union is demanding a 34 percent increase. The protesters later marched and rallied in front of the parliament.

Trinidadian police, who want a 40 percent increase, have carried out a number of sickouts in recent weeks.

The next day, a smaller crowd led by PSA President Winston Duke marched from the Ministry of Finance to a nearby roundabout. According to the Trinidad Express, "Duke then told protesters they would continue to protest throughout the month of March and that their strategy would be different every day."

## Washington, D.C., nurses locked out after one-day strike

The 1,600 nurses at Washington Hospital Center in the nation's capital will face a five-day lockout in the wake of a March 4 one-day strike over staffing levels, patient safety, wages and benefit cuts because management says it contracted to pay strikebreakers for 60 hours of work.

The contract covering members of National Nurses United (NNU) expired last spring, and a strike was narrowly averted in November of last year when hospital management unilaterally implemented cuts in night-shift pay differentials and replaced the old benefits package with a new plan.

Hospital management hired US Nursing Corporation to provide nurse strikebreakers during the walkout at a cost of \$3,500 per nurse per week. The Associated Press provided an openly sympathetic story for the recruitment of strikebreakers with a story that stated, "Are you a nurse who wants to visit new places, make a lot of money, and not be tied to the same old job? Well, then maybe strike-breaking is the career for you."

Washington Hospital Center is owned by MedStar Health, a \$3.9 billion not-for-profit health care operation that operates more than 40 hospital systems, including nine hospitals in the Maryland and Washington, D.C., area.

### **Hawaii electrical workers strike in wake of major storm**

About 1,200 electrical workers on the Hawaiian island of Oahu walked off the job March 4 after company officials refused to meet with them over their opposition to retirement and benefit cuts along with a proposed two-tier wage system. Two days earlier, on Wednesday, officials of Electrical Workers Local 1260 warned management it would strike Friday unless top management officials of the Hawaiian Electrical Company (HECO) and Maui Electric Company agreed to meet with them.

On the morning of the scheduled walkout, a major storm rocked the island of Oahu, knocking down power lines, leaving thousands of customers without power. Nonunion crews have been working to restore power with limited results.

The strike has enraged politicians, who previously saw no reason to protest management's intransigence. The old agreement between the union and the companies expired in October of last year.

### **Workers strike Owen Corning plant in South Carolina over pensions**

Over 80 workers at the Owens Corning production facility in Aiken County, South Carolina, walked off the job March 4 after negotiations between management and Teamsters Local 509 broke down over pensions. Back in February, when negotiations began, Owens Corning told the union it would no longer contribute to pensions and has obstinately held to that position, declaring it must remain globally competitive.

### **California county workers protest benefit cuts**

Workers in Kern County, California, continued protests for the third week in a row against deep benefit cuts instituted last year by county supervisors. Some 5,700 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 521 recently voted to strike unless they reach an

acceptable contract with the county.

### **Winnipeg city workers set to strike**

The 4,649 municipal government employees with the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba, could soon be on strike after talks broke down and workers delivered an overwhelming strike mandate to their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

In an attempt to avoid a confrontation their union has made an appeal to the Ministry of Labour for a mediated settlement and so have refused to set a strike deadline. Workers affected include phone operators, water and waste workers, and health inspectors, among others.

Issues in dispute include wages, benefits, pensions and job security. City negotiators had tabled a four-year deal that included improvements in some of these areas when talks broke off last Tuesday.

### **Staff at University of Winnipeg set to strike**

After 350 staff members voted 90 percent in favor of strike action last week the University of Winnipeg Faculty Association (UWFA) set a March 9 strike deadline.

In addition to teaching staff, those affected include librarians, coaches and counselors, who have been without a contract for almost a year. A final offer from the university was rejected by the UWFA membership last month, but no details have been released about the issues in dispute. Negotiations are ongoing. The union says it would welcome mediation if that becomes necessary.

### **Two-year lockout ends at Montreal tabloid**

About 60 of 253 workers at *Le Journal de Montreal*, who were locked out in January 2009, will return to work in the wake of a new contract accepted last week.

This will bring to an end one of the longest and certainly most bitter labor disputes in Canadian media history. Even after such a long battle, workers only narrowly passed the new contract, with just over 64 percent voting in favor.

*Le Journal* continued to be printed throughout the lockout using management staff and material from other publications. Although the union, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, blames lax provincial laws and a lack of public support for the length of the lockout, many union members have voiced criticism of the union leadership for its lack of any effective response to media giant Quebecor's aggressive tactics.



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