

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 June 2012

## Honduran teachers strike for back salaries

About 2,000 Honduran public school teachers struck May 28 to demand payment of back salaries for some 4,000 of their colleagues from 2010 and 2011. The strike action, called by the Honduran Federation of Educational Organizations (FOMH), included a march in the capital Tegucigalpa to the Pedagogical University.

The decision to hold the strike was taken in an assembly on May 27. FOMH had announced the action the week before giving an opportunity to the US-supported government to address the issue, but received no response.

Marchers carried empty pots “telling the government that in the kitchens of their homes there is nothing to eat,” Joel Espinal, president of one of the teachers unions, told reporters. According to an article in *Prensa Libre*, “Delays in payments to teachers are constant in Honduras, which the Finance Ministry attributes to administrative irregularities in assignments of professors who are not registered in the payroll.”

## One-day strike by Colombian state workers

State workers across Colombia held a 24-hour strike on May 30. The action was accompanied by protest marches in Bogotá and other major cities. A principal demand was the negotiation of a petition for salary raises and labor improvements that they had presented to President Juan Manuel Santos toward the end of 2010.

Unions and federations involved included the CUT, CTC and CGT workers federations, as well as the ISP public service workers confederation. The Colombian Educators Federation (Fecode), which represents some 330,000 teachers, claimed 90 percent adherence to the strike.

The strike was the first in 11 years by teachers in Colombia, notorious as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for union members.

According to *Vanguardia*, Fecode executive board

member Pedro Arango “maintained that although wages are low, on average 1 million to 2.5 million pesos per month (between 555 and 1,388 dollars), the strike doesn’t center on a specific salary demand but on conditions under which they work.” Teachers are also protesting the government’s consideration of augmenting the 30-hour workweek.

## Trinidad and Tobago: 90-day cement workers’ strike ends

Workers at Trinidad Cement Limited (TCL) ended their three-month strike on May 29. About 600 workers, members of the Oilfields Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU), had walked out February 28 over stalled salary negotiations for 2009 to 2011. The OWTU rejected the company’s offer of a 6.5 percent raise, demanding 16 percent.

Workers set up an encampment at the main TCL plant in Claxton Bay, where they picketed against shipments and scabs entering and leaving, but from the start, police and security personnel—often outnumbering the strikers—assured the flow of bagged cement, although at a reduced capacity. TCL also imported cement from its facilities in Barbados and Jamaica.

The parties had a number of meetings as the strike dragged on, with the OWTU lowering its demand to 12 percent. TCL briefly raised its offer to 7 percent, but returned it to 6.5 following the breakdown of one of the talks. TCL and the media were united in depicting the workers as unreasonable and violent, while discounting workers’ accusations of police brutality.

On May 29, about 365 permanent workers returned to the plant, where they were compelled to fill out registration forms before entering the plant. On May 30 and 31, the plant was padlocked and about 200 workers were told not to show up until further notice.

## Pickets from Indiana sanitation plant shut down

## California facility

Locked-out sanitation workers at Republic Services in Indiana dispatched pickets to a company facility in Richmond, California on June 1 where 180 members of Teamsters Local 315 honored the picket line. Republic Services locked out the 80 members of Teamsters Local 215 back on May 8 after workers declined to accept the replacement of their pensions with an inferior 401(k) plan.

The action by the Teamsters was largely symbolic and only affected a small portion of the workforce at Republic Services/Allied Waste, the nation's second largest sanitation corporation. The union represents some 9,000 workers at the company's 150 facilities across the US, Canada and Puerto Rico. According to the Teamsters, Republic Service workers in Mobile, Alabama went on strike in March when the company backed out of a signed contract.

Republic Services made \$589 million in profits in 2011. While Republic seeks to slash the health benefits of its workers, it has been revealed that the company has earmarked \$23 million in benefits for the estate of its president and CEO, Donald Slager, in the event of his death.

## Medical workers at Chicago hospital strike over wages

Medical staff and technology workers at the University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago (UIC) launched a three-day strike May 30 after thirty negotiating sessions failed to bring about a contract. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 indicated the strike was over wages.

The SEIU says UIC has offered some wage increases for certain categories of workers that approach market pay rates, but others are lacking. The fifty striking workers unionized last year due to years of stagnant wage rates and are looking for their first contract.

## Toronto social workers on strike

Community support workers at St. Christopher House in downtown Toronto, Ontario went on strike last week when their employer forced the union's hand.

The 190 workers affected, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), provide a wide range of community services to the unemployed as

well as to youth and immigrant workers. The striking workers themselves already work at poverty level wages enduring long work hours due to government underfunding.

## Another strike at Edmonton seniors home

Over 80 health care workers at the Revera Riverbend Retirement Residence in Edmonton, Alberta will be on strike this week after workers rejected a one percent wage offer in a new contract.

The strike involves nurses, health care aides and support staff who are members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE). Union leaders say Revera is a highly profitable industry giant and that their wage offer for health care workers is 11-14 percent below the industry standard, and far lower than that for housekeeping staff.

This is the second strike of its kind in Edmonton. Workers at Hardisty Care Centre walked off the job last week over wages as well.

## University of Victoria set for strike action

Two union locals at University of Victoria on Vancouver Island voted last week to go on strike after being without a contract for over a year, but no date has yet been set for a walkout.

Office and technical staff who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), as well as skilled trades and other staff in another local of the same union, voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action in separate votes. The union is awaiting essential service designation before announcing any job action and mediated talks are ongoing.



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