

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 March 2015

## Latin America

### Mexican farmworkers: Protest actions continue as talks collapse

Although the strike by farmworkers for higher wages and better working conditions in the Valle de San Quintin, Baja California, Mexico has subsided, protests continue.

While thousands of workers, some in buses guarded by police patrols, returned to the fields to pick berries, tomatoes and other produce, striking workers have engaged in protest actions, including a caravan of buses throughout the state, a petition campaign and demonstrations.

Talks between strike leaders and owners broke down on March 27, when a growers' representative walked out after reading a statement claiming that raising wages "would lead to economic collapse." The strike leaders had already lowered their daily salary demand of 300 pesos (US\$20) to 200 pesos (US\$13), but owners stuck with their last offer of 115 pesos, about \$7.55.

Protests have continued along the Transpeninsular Highway, but without the blockades. On March 26, about 2,000 protesters marched to San Quintin's state government offices. Heavily armed police surrounded them the whole time.

The strike leaders have hooked up with the United Farm Workers (UFW), which has launched a petition drive and has been "reaching out to retailers to let them know of the situation," as one UFW official told *U-T San Diego*.

### Paraguayan radiologists announce strike

On March 27, radiologists at the Social Security Institute (IPS) Central Hospital in Asuncion, Paraguay demonstrated to protest the authorities' failure to carry out several demands. The workers' union, the Authentic Syndicate of Functionaries (Safips), announced that they would go on

strike after the Easter holiday season.

A Safips spokesperson, Rene Alonso, told *abc.com.py* that the IPS has given no attention to the workers' demands, including recognition through licensure of the career of radiology, the non-fulfillment of agreements made during previous tripartite talks and labor conditions for contracted workers.

Of particular concern is the lack of attention to exposure to radiation. "We don't even have lead-lined vests," said Alonso.

### One-day strikes by Uruguayan teachers over working conditions, violence

Teachers in Uruguay's primary and secondary schools held one-day strike actions in Montevideo last week. On March 25, members of the Montevideo Teachers Association (Ademu) struck following an attack on a kindergarten teacher. Such attacks have increased in recent years; Ademu's policy is to call for a one-day strike following each incident.

In two other cities, Canelones and Maldonado, where a teacher was threatened the week before, a one-day strike by primary teachers had partial adherence. Although Ademu has sought to raise the action to the national level, the Uruguayan Teachers Federation has so far ruled out the suggestion.

Secondary school teachers in Montevideo stopped work for 24 hours March 26 to dramatize their demand for improved working conditions. Among the conditions they protested were shortages of personnel for daily tasks, delays in repairs and the lack of security measures to protect teachers from increasing violence.

### Protests, strikes by Jamaican hotel renovation workers over wage nonpayment

Construction workers at a hotel renovation project in Jamaica have held a number of strikes and protests. Hundreds of workers have carried out the actions to protest the nonpayment of their salaries and working conditions.

The Sunset Jamaica Grande in Ocho Rios, Jamaica was bought in August 2014 by Mexican firm Palace Resorts and was scheduled for reopening under a new name, Moon Palace, in January. However, construction workers complained of persistent nonpayment of wages from subcontractors—who claimed that the contractor, ICON, had not paid them—and held protests and strikes to demand their overdue wages.

The most recent walkout began on March 13 after wages promised following a March 4 strike were not paid. On March 26, the hotel announced that it had hired a project management firm, Enviro-Planners, and that an agreement with the workers had been reached. Some unpaid workers, nonetheless, continued their protests. The situation was complicated by a fire that broke out at one of the buildings on March 27, casting suspicion on “disgruntled” workers.

Another factor is the stated intention of the contractor, Enviro-Planners, to bring Mexican workers to complete the project, triggering nationalistic calls by some workers to limit the number of workers from outside the island.

## **The United States**

### **Vermont legislature pushes bill to ban teachers’ strikes**

The Vermont legislature’s House Committee on Education voted 8-3 March 17 to advance a bill that would ban teachers’ strikes to the full House. In situations where school boards and the Vermont National Education Association (NEA) cannot reach agreement, the bill proposes that a mediator be brought in and penalties will be imposed on the district if the two sides fail to reach agreement.

The bill was introduced by Republican Representative Kurt Wright, but is being supported by Democrats who hold a majority in the House. The Vermont NEA indicated they are not in principle opposed to a ban on teachers’ strikes. NEA spokesman Darren Allen declared, “If they want to take away the right of teachers to strike then the only way that that is acceptable is binding arbitration. It insures that a contract will be reached.”

Allen also feigned amazement at the role of the Democratic Party, saying, “We don’t expect this type of anti-

labor, anti-teacher law, bill, idea to come out of a Democratically controlled legislature in the Northeastern United States.” But the NEA has had ample warning. In 2014, Democratic governor Peter Shumlin denounced a strike by Burlington teachers and declared he supported a ban on teachers’ strikes. In his budget address last January, he called on teachers to reopen contracts and give up pay increases and demanded student-teacher ratios be increased and school spending be cut.

## **Canada**

### **Toronto university strike ends with arbitration**

The nearly month-long strike by 6,000 teaching assistants (TAs) and other support staff at the University of Toronto is being called off by union leaders after pushing through a vote to send the dispute to binding arbitration as requested by the university.

Throughout the dispute, the leadership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has sought to dampen the militancy of the TAs and have now brought their strike to an end with this capitulation. At stake is the overall funding for graduate students, which the university has refused to spell out in a collective agreement. Last week the membership turned down the latest deal accepted by their bargaining committee and the subsequent decision in favor of arbitration was made by just over 900 votes, representing a small minority of the membership since most were not present at the vote.

As a result, and despite the consistent opposition of the membership to the terms being advocated by their union bargaining committee, striking TAs and other workers were back on the job last Friday. At the same time, the strike by TAs at neighboring York University continues into its second month.



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